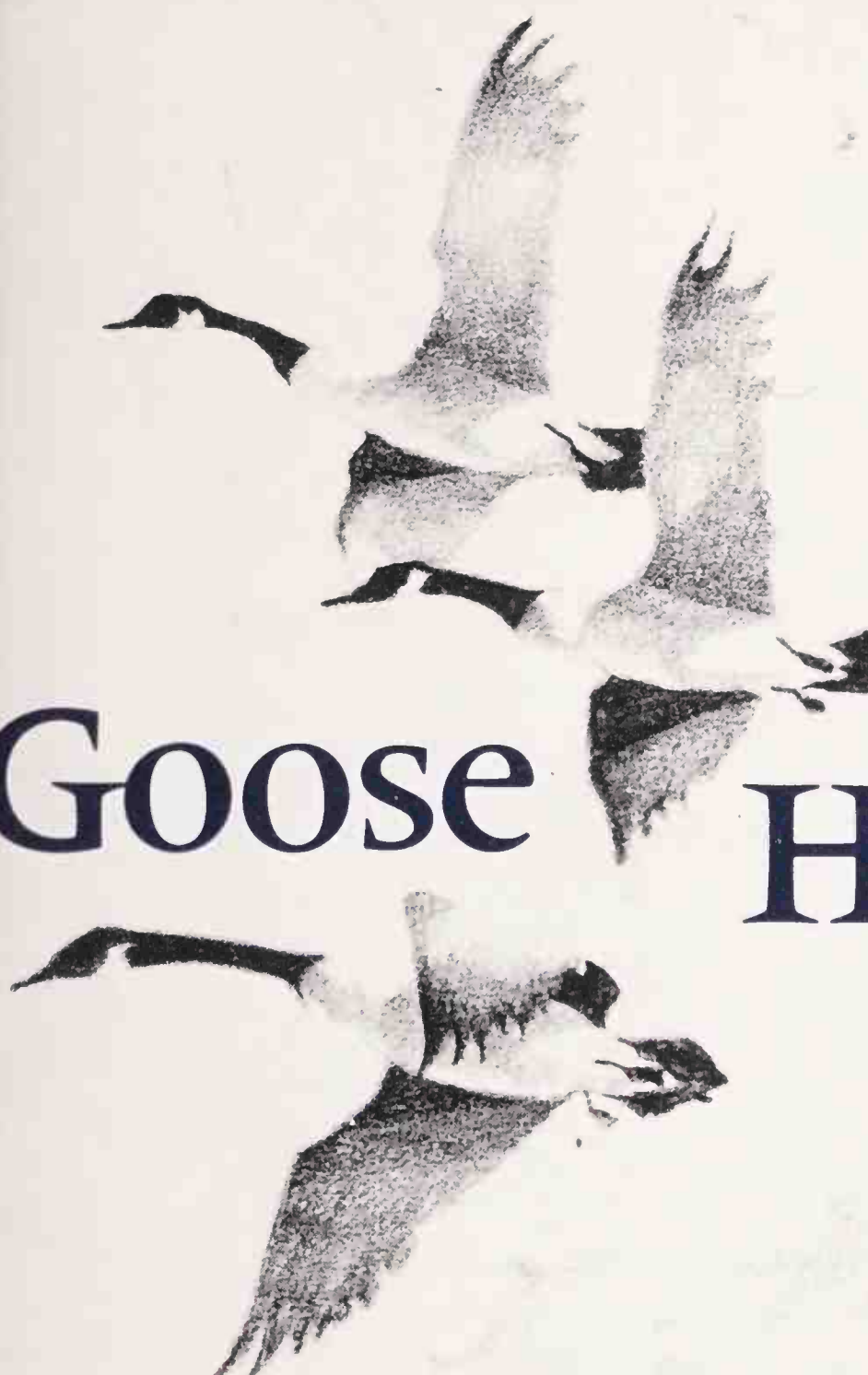


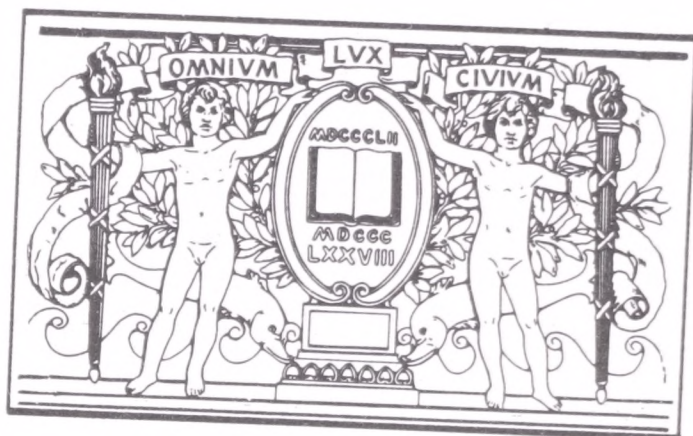
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An illustration of two geese in flight, positioned above the title. One goose is in the upper left, and the other is slightly below and to the right of it. Both are shown in profile, flying towards the right. Their wings are spread, showing detailed feather patterns. The background is a light, textured wash.

Goose Hunting

Charles L. Cadieux

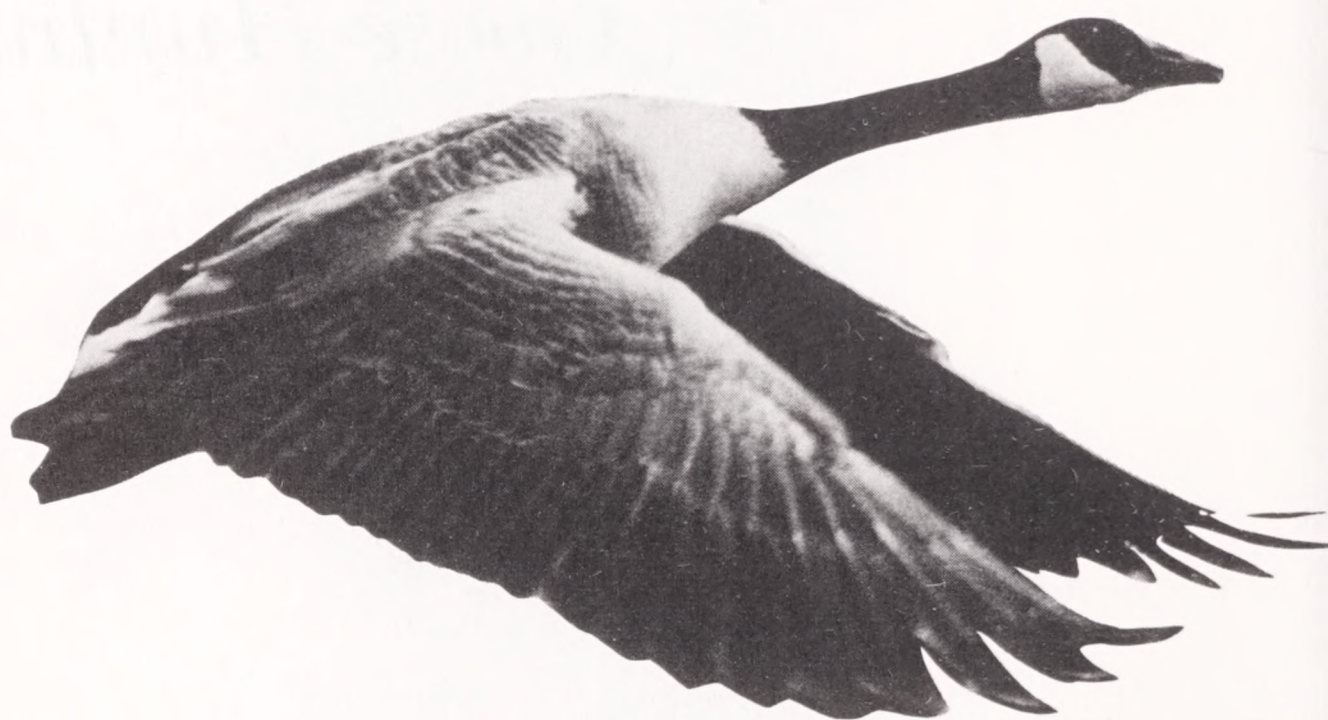




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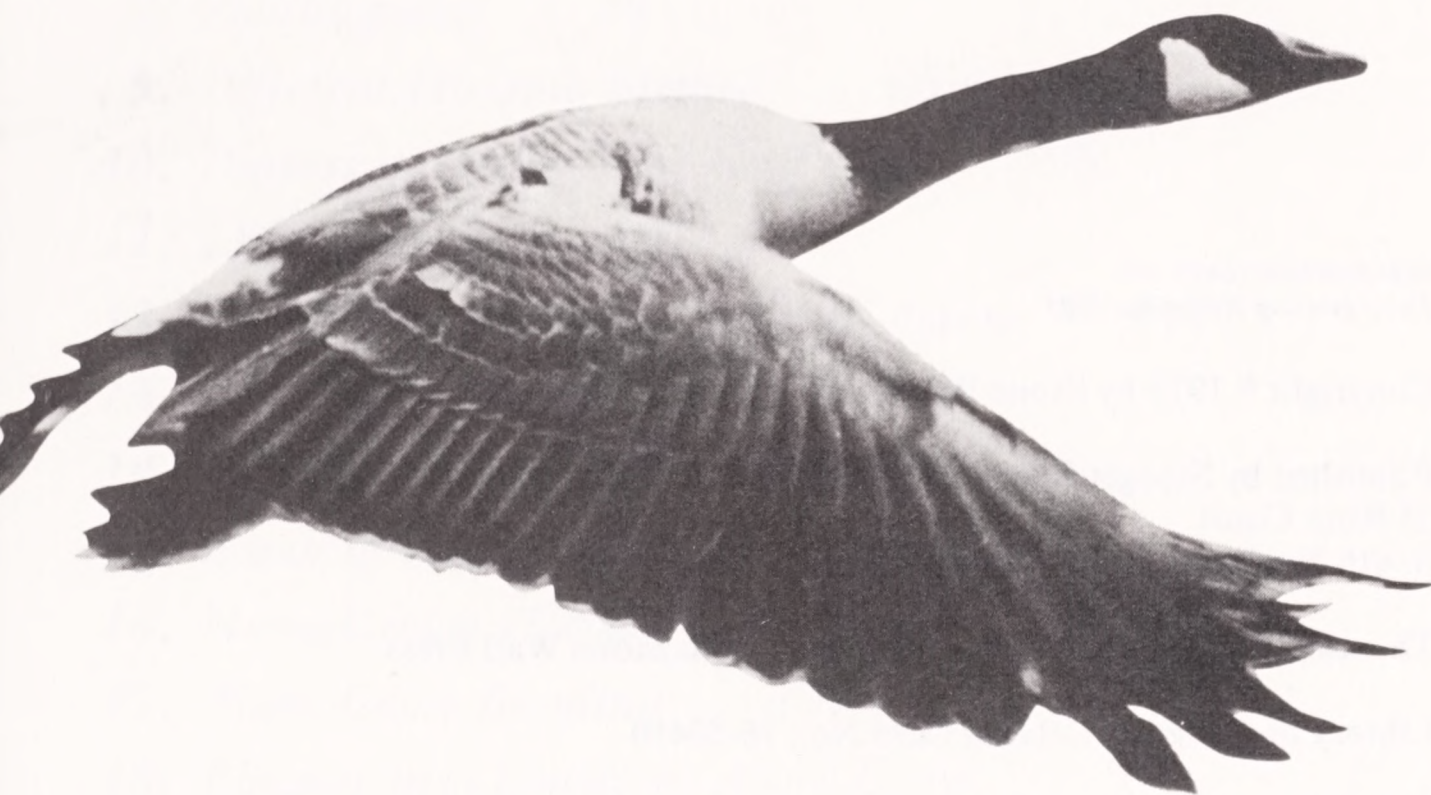


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Goose Hunting

CHARLES L. CADIEUX



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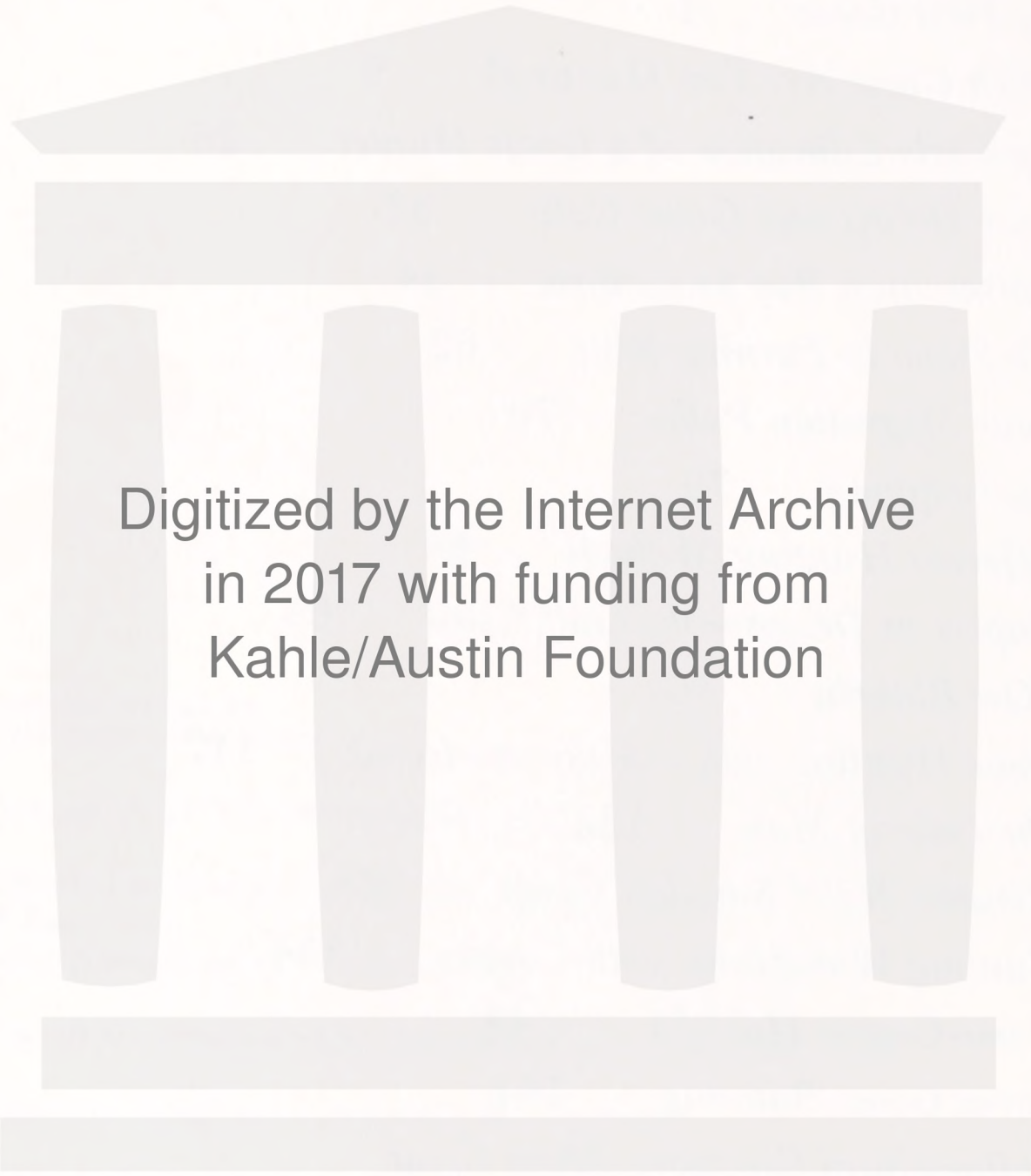
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Foreword

THE MANAGEMENT of our continental goose populations, and their resurgence in numbers, has been one of the brightest spots in man's history of stewardship over his natural resources.

From the very dangerous lows of the early thirties, Canada Goose populations have increased greatly. It is only a few minutes' drive—less than an hour—to reach the Chesapeake Bay from our offices here in the Interior Department. And once across the Annapolis Bay Bridge, the visitor is able to see the fruits of this goose management program, graphically illustrated by the more than half a million Canada Geese which winter on the Eastern Shore. This half a million geese, surrounded by the continent's greatest population centers—New York, Philadelphia, Washington and Baltimore—is proof that intelligent management can make it possible for wildlife to exist in close harmony with man, even when that wildlife is one of the most desired of all huntable species—the lordly Canada Goose.

Other goose species have done almost as well.

The Department of the Interior has played an important part in that careful management during the last half century. It was the federal enforcement officers who spearheaded early efforts to protect goose populations against spring shooting. It was the National Wildlife Refuge System of more than 300 areas which provided nesting and production areas like Bear River in Utah; migration and wintering areas like Brigantine and Blackwater on the East Coast; Horicon, Horseshoe Lake and Swan Lake in the Mississippi Flyway; Buffalo Lake and Aransas in the Central Flyway; and Tule Lake and Imperial on the West Coast.

I am proud of the fact that the author of this book, *Goose Hunting*, is a product of a long career in the Department of the Interior. We are all proud of the fact that this book gives credit where credit is due—to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service officers who spent long hours molding public opinion around to the side of the law-abiding citizen, rather than the side of those who shot geese all year long. We are proud that this book gives credit to the Wildlife Refuge System, and to the research and management arms of the Fish and Wildlife Service which have developed so much of the sophisticated machinery which now sets our open seasons, bag limits and other rules by which the hunt is governed.

We acknowledge the fact that none of this work could have been

Foreword

viii accomplished without the unstinting cooperation of the fifty state game and fish departments, for they have been major partners with the Department of the Interior for many years in goose management. Without them no one would be so sanguine as to expect that we would be where we are today.

But more than anything else, we are proud of the American sportsman, who has made it all possible.

Make no mistake, it is the waterfowl hunter who has done the most to perpetuate and increase this most aristocratic of all hunting sports. License money has furnished the backbone of support for all management programs over the years. Sportsmen themselves led the fight to get the Pittman–Robertson Law passed by Congress and signed into law. They led this fight, even though it was going to increase the costs of their hunting. They were willing to pay, because they knew that the money would be used to improve the status of all wildlife—which would have to include the goose.

As Assistant Secretary of the Interior, I have ample reason to know that the American sportsman, the goose hunter that “our former employee” talks about in this book, is not a game hog, not a meat hunter, not a hunting slob. *Goose Hunting* chronicles the hunt in many of its fascinating facets, and it also chronicles the more important fights which were won, and sometimes lost, by sportsmen’s organizations—fights that have led to the successful perpetuation of America’s traditional heritage, the pursuit of the aristocrat of waterfowl, the goose.

Chuck Cadieux toiled in the federal vineyard for a total of 28 years, 18 of it with our Fish and Wildlife Service, some of it in our office. We are glad that he has seen fit to record so much of the past and the future of goose hunting. We are proud of Interior’s part in keeping goose hunting as a sport. But we are even more proud of the United States of America’s sportsmen who go afield with a shotgun—whether it be in pursuit of the family of Giant Canadas in a Nebraska wheat field, or seeking Pacific Black Brant on the tidal flats of northern Washington, or seeking the smallest of them all, the Ross’s Goose, as it migrates through the Pacific Northwest.

I am personally pleased with *Goose Hunting* because it weaves the complex interrelationships between geese, the impact of man, the professional wildlife management and enforcement staffs and the hunter into an interesting and factual text that should capture the attention of all readers.

ROBERT L. HERBST
Assistant Secretary of the Interior

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CHAPTER

1

The First Goose

JAMESTOWN sits in a shallow valley carved from the North Dakota prairie by the James River. We never called it the James; it was the Jim, and we proudly told one and all that it was the Longest Unnavigable River in the world. We believed that, although I've never found any proof of the claim, and I bet I can name a dozen that are longer and just as unnavigable.

In October of 1929, the Jim was a slow river, meandering leisurely southward even after the faster-flowing Pipestem joined it right in Jamestown. Today, this small city extends right up to the State Insane Asylum; then that institution was several miles out of town to the southeast.

In the goose season of 1929 there was much rain, and even some early snow. Farmers shocked their grain in those days, standing it up by hand, leaning one bundle against another to hold the heads up off the ground. That year the rains came with irritating frequency, soaking the grain again just as it was almost dry enough to pitchfork onto the bundle wagons and haul to the threshing machine. Leaving grain in the fields is like setting a table for the waterfowl, and Canada Geese were no exception. When the wheat stood in the shocks, it was just exactly the right height for a big goose.

Jamestown wasn't known as a hot goose-hunting spot. Oh, sure, George Brake and Eddie Larsen and my Uncle Weets got their share every year, but they were specialists who took their vacation to hunt geese. However, it was the center of some excellent duck hunting, and the stubblefields held Ol' Yellow Legs, the Prairie Chicken, in great flocks. Each thornapple and bulberry clump in the grasslands could be expected to hold Sharptailed Grouse. There was lots of shotgunning for anyone, man or boy, who sought it, and *No Hunting* signs were almost unheard of.

The boy left town along the winding path that edged the Jim River,

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a path whose contours were so well known to him that he could follow it effortlessly, even where it was drifted over with the yellow and brown leaves of the cottonwood and box elder trees. He walked rapidly, for his reddish-brown jacket was light, and the chill wind was fighting the bright sun for control of the temperature—and winning. He wore a heavy mitten on his left hand, but since it was necessary to keep his trigger finger ready, he had only a light jersey glove on his right.

Passing the Insane Asylum, he made a big detour so that Mr. Garson wouldn't see him and call him over. Mr. Garson wasn't really crazy, but his folks were tired of taking care of him, so they had had him committed. Mr. Garson liked it when the boy came to visit and taught him lots of things. He taught him that muskrats—he called them mushrats—were good to eat. But the boy had made a mistake; he told his mother how Mr. Garson fixed muskrats, simmering them slowly in lots of onions. His mother, horrified at the idea of her son eating with a “crazy man,” had ordered him never to go to Mr. Garson's tarpaper and cardboard shack again. The boy had obeyed, although he hated to lose out on learning things—like how to find a Mallard's nest, how to catch rabbits in fishing-line snares, how to trap mushrats so that they “drownded” instead of “wringin' off.”

Four hours after leaving home, long after he had passed the little town of Homer—which isn't even there any more—he saw a pair of Mallards sitting on a mudbank, almost under a cutbank. He watched how the tall grass waved in the wind, right above them, and gauged how far he would have to go to get within sure killing range. His single-shot weighed in at nine and a half pounds; the boy weighed in at ninety-nine pounds. He took his time planning his approach, then went down on his belly and inched along out of sight in the sere brown grass, the sound of his movement masked by the wind rustling the leaves and grass.

It took more than ten minutes, but when he poked the gun's muzzle through the tall grass, he was staring at the ducks from about forty feet away. The hammer made only a tiny click when he cocked it. He wanted both of those ducks, and he searched for a way to line them up so that he could kill both with one shot. Bitter experience had taught him that you get neither bird when you try to shoot between them, hoping to spread the pattern to cover both. Regretfully, he decided that he could kill only one. He centered the drake over the top of the 30-inch barrel and pulled the trigger. Jumping to his feet, he tried frantically to reload in time to get the hen, but failed. She was too far. His father gave him one shell for each bird killed. Misses meant fewer

shells to hunt with, and it meant spending the funds he had hoarded by selling sweet corn from door to door, by shoveling sidewalks and other chores.

The drake was a beauty, weighing nearly three pounds, so his day was a great success. He wedged the head between his belt and his hip bones and pulled the belt one notch tighter. His mother had provided two big sandwiches before he had left that morning, and he now ate both of them. The food brought some warmth to his body, but fatigue was now adding to the cold wind's discomfort, so he decided to head for home.

"Just as apt to find ducks on the river I been hunting as on the river I ain't hunted yet," he thought, "cuz they musta all been out feeding when I came through this morning."

North of the Old Henderson Place, a bend in the river could be shortcutted, taking about half a mile out of the return trip. He crossed the river on the rocks near where he and his dad picked wild plums each summer, went through the Horsebarn Meadows, where dad always came to pick meadow mushrooms the second day after a summer rainstorm, and returned to the river path, keeping a sharp lookout for the new Holstein bull the Hendersons had just bought.

Half a mile north of the pasture fence, his eye caught movement in the eastern sky. Slowly he lowered into a kneeling position, remembering what his dad had told him: "Sudden moves are always seen, but slow moves you might get away with." Fifteen big Canada Geese, the ones that had lived on these prairies before the white man came, were flying slowly into the northwest wind, heading for the cornfield ahead of him!

He didn't even twitch a muscle as the birds made three slow circles around the "hogged off" cornfield to satisfy themselves that there was no danger waiting there. Then they turned into the wind, cupped their wings and slid majestically down the rushing river of air, black feet stretching earthward.

Their big wings bucketed the air twice, then they lit. He could see the long black necks and the white cheek patches, but the lower parts of their bodies were hidden from view.

He knew what he had to do. He would crawl backwards half a block to the river's edge, duck down below the cutbank and walk upright till he got about even with the geese. Then he would hide the Mallard under the cutbank and raise one eyeball over the edge to look. If he was in the right place, he would still be one hundred yards from the geese. Then he'd have to crawl the rest of the way to get into range. He knew that he had about half an hour, because it would take the

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birds that long to fill up on corn. As soon as they had finished eating, he knew they'd head back for the water areas where they roosted, wherever that was.

Crawling backwards you get dirt inside the bottoms of your trousers, unless you lift each foot high with each crawling motion. He could feel the damp dirt rolling up against his legs, but that couldn't be helped. He was already figuring out what he'd tell mom, "The dirt will wash out, mom, but that was my only chance at a goose."

Sliding backwards over the riverbank, he caught himself so that he wouldn't slip into the black water. It looked cold, because it was just barely above freezing. In fact, shiny flat platelets of ice had formed around each branch sticking up out of the water. He moved quickly, ignoring two Gadwalls which came whistling by. "After bigger game this time," he told himself, and even allowed himself a slightly superior smile as he watched the ducks go by.

He had marked the position of the geese from the fence post nearest to the river, and now he stretched on tiptoe to see that post. He crept belly first to its base and looked around carefully. He remembered what his dad had said, "They usually got sentries posted on each side—geese standing watch, not eating." The boy had a high regard for the wariness of the geese, born of being outsmarted every time last year.

"I've learned a few things now," he told himself as he studied the lay of the land from behind a fringe of waving yellow-white grass. He couldn't see the geese, but could hear their contented gabbling. Allowing for the fact that the sound probably drifted down with the wind, he figured where the geese had to be. The distance was about 150 yards, with no cover other than the short prairie grass and the few cornstalks which the hogs hadn't knocked down.

He eased the Mallard's neck out of his belt and pushed it under a thick clump of grass to hide it from the Marsh Hawks that patrolled slowly southward at this time of the year. Taking a couple of deep breaths, he started "bellying up" on the geese.

Slowly the distance shrank, until he estimated that another sixty yards and he'd be right in among them. Sixty yards was beyond the killing range of his gun—that he knew. Besides, he was remembering what dad had said, "When you invest a five-cent shotgun shell, son, you want to get at least five cents' worth of meat." He was scheming how he would get into point-blank range and kill maybe three birds with one shot.

He forced himself to lie still, hoping that his breathing would slow down, hoping that his heart would quit pounding so hard. He didn't have time to worry about the shiny black mud that was slowly turning dull gray as it dried on the front of his jacket. He inched forward,



The boy's father had taught him to be extra careful of the "sentry" geese which Canada flocks always seemed to have posted.

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following the taller grass which made his work easier. With a little cover, he could raise his butt a little bit, making it possible to get a toehold and gain a couple of feet with each wiggle, instead of only a couple of inches.

Then it happened: His right hand, securely holding the foregrip of the gun, hit water!

Instinctively he recoiled, lifted the hand and the gun above the three inches of swiftly flowing water that spread across the ground ahead of him. Slowly he raised his head to look. It was a stream which ran across the cornfield—all the way across. There was no way to go around. He could jump it; but if he got to his feet, the geese would be gone.

There was no help for it. It had to be. Resolutely, he crawled forward into the stream of icy water. Manfully, he stifled the yelp of pain that rose in his throat as the water hit his belly, gasped silently as the water ran between his legs and soaked his feet. He could feel water sopping inside the boots that his grandma had bought him for Christmas—the ones with the jackknife in the pocket on the side.

Clear of the water now, but desperate with the cold, he crawled ahead. Water soaking out of his clothes left a dark trail on the dirt. The geese were only forty yards away now, and he began to dream the impossible: He would line up four heads in a line and “ground swat” all four at once. He knew dad wouldn’t approve of such a tactic, but this was his first chance, and he intended to cash in.

It was not meant to be. A goose off to his left, one he hadn’t even seen, sounded the strident alarm call, and the air was filled with laboring black wings as the geese jumped into flight. The boy didn’t remember getting to his feet, but he remembered how slowly his gun caught up with the white crescent on the tail of a gigantic goose. The barrel continued to climb across the back of the bird, which was trying to stand on its tail, and finally caught up to the head. He squeezed hard and the gun roared. Knocked a foot backward by the push of the recoil, the boy watched in amazement and joyful awe as the goose crumpled and fell to earth.

It was very big and it was very dead. He had never seen such a huge goose. Dad had weighed three big ones last fall, geese he’d shot over near Jim Lake some thirty miles to the north. They had averaged eleven pounds. Surely this bird was twice as big!

He had a big lump in his throat as he turned the bird over and lovingly smoothed the breast feathers into place, admiring the delicate shades of gray and black and brown. A couple of tears—from the wind—squeezed past his eyelids and coursed down his cheeks. Angrily he brushed them away with his sodden left mitten, leaving a

muddy streak across his face. Grabbing his goose just below the chin, he tried to hoist it out in front of him, but found that he couldn't walk because the wings hung in his way. He solved the problem by swinging the goose over his shoulder, its long neck on his shoulder, the satisfying weight banging on his back.

Suddenly he was very cold. He knew that he had to get out of his wet clothes and get warm, and soon! He started trotting toward home, remembered the Mallard and went back after it. It was frozen stiff, and he had trouble working its head under his belt with his cold-stiffened hands. With the duck swinging at his knees and the goose banging on his back, he walked, bending forward to keep the goose still. Looking down at his feet that way, he noticed that his pants had frozen stiff. That explained why it felt like he was walking inside a box, hitting his skinny legs on the wood at each step.

Shivering violently, he cut away from the river and headed for the Homer Road, hoping to catch a ride in one of the infrequent cars which passed by. Arlo Svendsen came along in his new Model A, slowed down to admire the goose, but didn't stop. Mrs. Svendsen said, "Don't pick him up. He's all mud. It'd take a week to get the car clean again."

He ran steadily along the road, eating up the distance until he got a catch in his side. Then he slowed to a walk and shifted the goose to his other shoulder. That was a mistake. His jacket was frozen and air tight, except where the goose had been. When he moved the goose, the wind hit that unfrozen spot and came right through into his wet underwear. He shivered along for a couple of blocks, then his wind came back and he started to run again.

Two blocks past the Asylum Bridge, he met two schoolmates. "Wow! Lookit the goose he got! Wow, Man, where'd you get it?" They offered to help carry the goose, but he kept it, giving the unloaded shotgun and the duck to Jimmy, who ran the rest of the way home with him.

When he opened the door into the back shed, his mother had just opened the other door that led into the kitchen. She looked at him in dismay and asked, "What happened? Did you fall in the river?" Then she saw the goose and forgot his wet clothes for a minute. "My Lord in Heaven," she asked, "was there ever such a goose?"

The boy's words were all coming tumbled together as he tried to tell how he got close to the geese, but she hustled him off to the bathroom. "Get out of those wet clothes and into a hot tub! Hot as you can stand it, now!"

Warm and dry in an extra sweater, he ate three big bowls of the homemade soup—almost a stew—that simmered on the back of the

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8 cast-iron range. Between mouthfuls he made frequent trips to the back door to let in one or another of his admiring schoolmates who had come to see the goose.

Best of all were the squeals of delight and admiration from his own six brothers and four sisters. There had never been a day of triumph like this one—and the best was yet to come!

The boy's father was a railroad switchman on the Northern Pacific, and he got off work at four o'clock. It took about forty minutes for his father to walk home, and the boy was waiting in the shed when his father came in. "Look what I shot, Dad!"

The look of surprise on his father's face was the biggest reward of this day of triumph. "Good gravy," his father said, "Son, that goose must weigh nine hundred pounds. It's bigger'n any goose I ever shot in thirty years of hunting." He put his arm around the boy and gave him a squeeze. "You oughta be proud, Son. That's a trophy goose if I ever saw one."

"Got him flying, too, Dad," the boy said as his father hung up his jacket and put his lunch box on the table. He came back to where the boy stood looking down at the great goose. "Let's get started picking on him, Son. There's bound to be two barrels of down on that brute!"

"Do I get a shotgun shell for that one, Dad?"

Without a word his father reached up on the shelf and gave him a full box of Remington 4 shot. "Be careful with them, Son. But I don't have to tell you that any more. You're a goose hunter now."

I still am—fifty years later.

Which Goose Are You Hunting?

IDENTIFYING geese is easy—much easier than identifying the more numerous species of ducks. Since you can get into lots of arguments about the total number of different goose species, or subspecies, I offer a fool-proof system that classifies all United States geese into nine species.

The nine geese in my classification are:

- | | |
|---------------------------|-----------------------|
| 1. The Canada Goose | 6. The Emperor Goose |
| 2. The Greater Snow Goose | 7. The Barnacle Goose |
| 3. The Lesser Snow Goose | 8. The Nene Goose |
| 4. The Whitefronted Goose | 9. The Brant Goose |
| 5. The Ross's Goose | |

CANADA GOOSE

In some biologists' classifications, there are many species of Canada Goose, including Giant Canadas, Tall Grass Prairie Flocks and Short Grass Prairie Flocks, Richardson's Geese, Hutchins's Geese, Cackling and Aleutian Geese, among others. I prefer to simplify. If it looks like a Canada, acts like a Canada, flies like a Canada and tastes like a Canada—it is a Canada, and nothing more need be said.

Be warned: This is a hunter's opinion, not an ornithologist's. I'm simplifying too much for some tastes. The American Ornithological Union recognizes ten separate races of *Branta canadensis*, with most of the distinctions being based on relative size and on delicate shadings in color. This is like saying that Marilyn Monroe and Gina Lollo-

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10 brigida belong to different subspecies because they have different-colored hair.

Sizes do vary greatly. The Giant Canada (*Branta canadensis moffitti*) is at least ten inches longer than *Branta canadensis minima*. Canadas are the biggest of all races of geese, if we judge by recorded maximum weights. In general, weights of all races of Canadas vary from two and a half pounds up to fourteen pounds. You undoubtedly have heard of geese which weighed much more than fourteen pounds, but did you ever personally weigh one? Bigger geese are rare. In pioneer days, one family of honkers living on the prairies of the Dakotas and Saskatchewan commonly weighed in between sixteen and twenty pounds. But when the plow and the drainage tile took their habitat, they disappeared. Nowadays, there are a few such whoppers in captivity—and perhaps a few in the wild. Don't count on finding one.

How do we explain such great differences in size if Canadas are all one species? There is a logical explanation. Geese have very strong family ties. The young stay with their parents on the fall migration southward, through the wintering period and on the return to the northern breeding grounds. As a result, the young birds are imprinted to a particular breeding area before they have paired off. Therefore, the young gander can only woo a goose from the breeding area that produced him. His only chance to find a life-mate is among geese to whom he is closely related. Often he mates with a cousin, and sometimes he mates with a sister. This means line inbreeding—the mating of close relatives—which has the effect of accentuating characteristics, good ones and bad ones. Even as inbreeding in humans can produce genius or insanity, blindness or albinism, snub noses or long noses—so inbreeding among descendants of a large goose can produce even larger geese.

In the case of Canada Geese, inbreeding occurs as a result of discrete populations sharing isolated habitat niches—without the chance for healthy outbreeding with other populations. This has resulted in accentuating size characteristics, and has produced the Giant Canadas as well as the tiny Canadas of the Aleutian Islands. Inbreeding in Canada Goose populations results also in slight changes of color arrangement, with one group having a darker underbelly than the next, or a wider cheek patch, or less mottling on the breast feathers.

According to this goose hunter, these differences among family groups—not among separate subspecies—are not enough to rate separate names. They all deserve the highest accolade of the waterfowl world: They are all Canada Geese.

Today, almost all Canada Goose families are prospering. The increase in their numbers across the length and breadth of the conti-



The Canada Goose, regardless of his size or which family he belongs to, is the aristocrat of all geese hunted in America.

ment is one of the most heartening success stories of modern wildlife management. But it is possible that this success may result in more homogenizing of goose races than we have had heretofore. As larger and larger family groups return to breed in every shrinking nesting ground, their ranges will overlap. It will not be possible to maintain family purity on overlapping breeding grounds. The gander whose roving eye is tempted by a gorgeous young goose is not going to question whether or not she comes from a "good" family before he decides to mate. This cross-breeding is healthy, and will surely result in a more nearly uniform size for all Canada Geese. Evolution is in action, but it doesn't happen overnight. In our lifetimes, there will be Canadas weighing three pounds and Canadas weighing fifteen pounds. Good luck to you in your search for the big ones.

Regardless of size, Canada Geese are all of an overall gray-brown color. The head and neck are black, with a prominent white cheek patch on the side of the head. The breast is lighter colored, often showing some chestnut. The beak, feet and legs are black.

In summertime, they can be found nesting from the Arctic Circle across Canada and Alaska all the way south to Denver, Colorado. Increasing numbers are nesting in the lower forty-eight states, the result of intensive efforts to reintroduce breeding flocks. See Chapter Sixteen for more on this effort.

Canada Geese winter from the Aleutians all the way across the continent to the Carolinas. The heaviest single concentration is in the Eastern Shore area of Maryland, where as many as 600,000 Canadas spend the winter months, a great increase from a couple of decades ago.

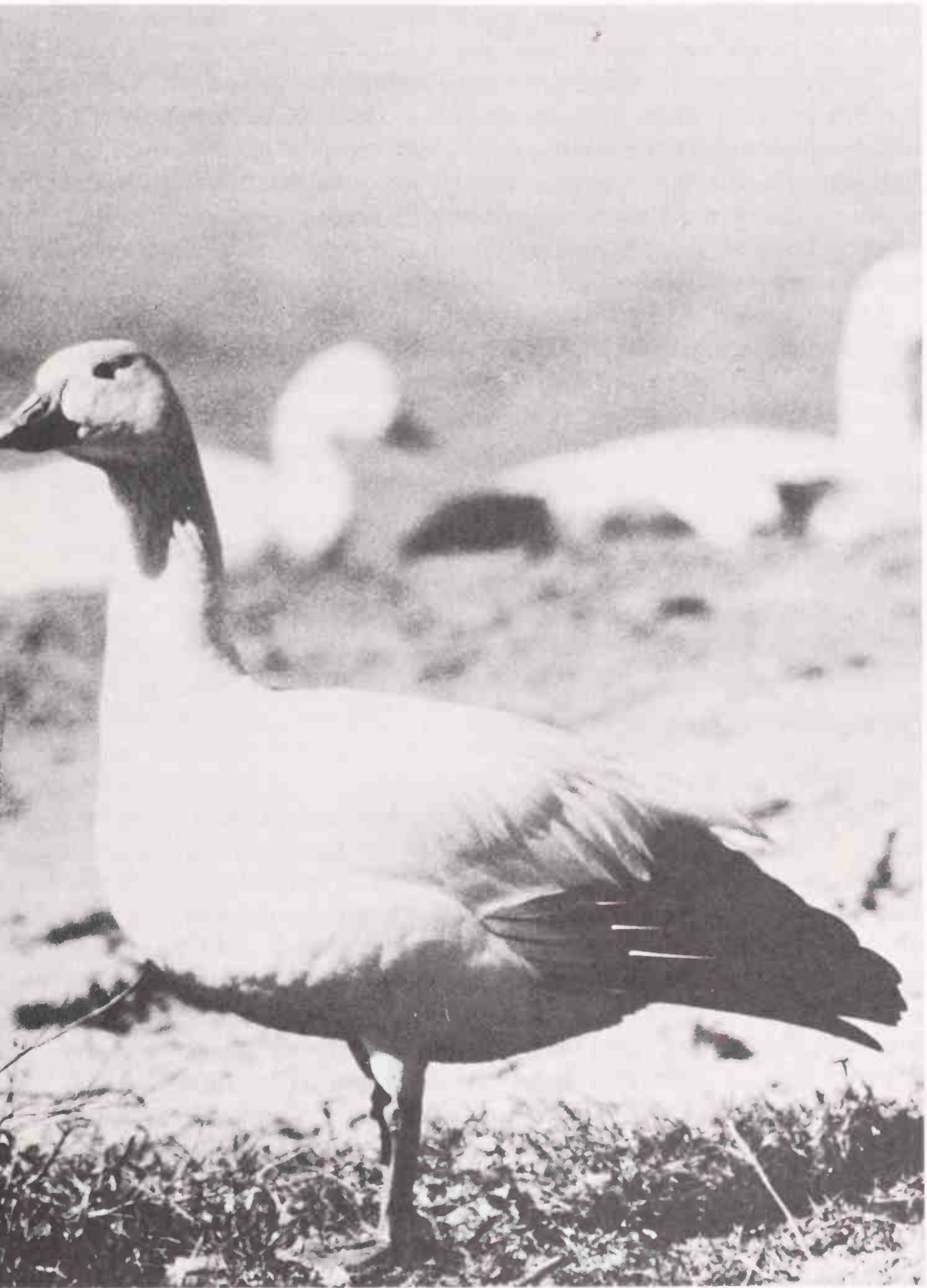
Some of the smallest Canadas, the Aleutian birds, choose to winter right there in the snow, fog and intense cold. But when they roam, they go all the way south to sunny Southern California.

Most Canada Geese nest on the ground, especially in the North. However, they are not above choosing old Osprey nests as nurseries for their young. Both parents tend the young and will usually fight to protect the nest and their offspring.

The scientific name of *Branta canadensis* covers them all, no matter which subspecies or family you are lucky enough to bag. They're all Canadas, and there's no finer compliment for a goose than that!

GREATER SNOW GOOSE

These handsome white birds have black primary feathers on their wings and also sport pink feet and a pink beak. Sometimes they show



Typical adult Snow Goose.

14 a decided rusty coloration on their white heads and necks. This rusty color is especially noticeable on young birds, who also show an overall smoky color on their white breasts and sides.

The Snow Goose is called *Chen hyperborea*, “the goose from beyond the north wind,” and that certainly is a descriptive name for this biggest of all white geese. Sometimes weighing as much as seven and a half pounds, the Snow Goose averages around six. As its scientific name indicates, it is a far northern nester, nesting in the eastern part of the Canadian Arctic, where it lays its six eggs on the tundra and covers them on all sides with down from its own breast.

This “Greater” Snow Goose migrates down the Atlantic Seaboard states, and winters from Florida north through the Carolinas, all the way up to Massachusetts. On the wintering grounds, it favors salt-water habitats. This goose is holding its own in numbers, perhaps even slightly increasing over its range. So far, it has not shown any of the dominant “blue-phase” mutation which is turning the Lesser Snow Goose into a blue species.

Great concentrations of this bird are found along the Saint Lawrence River in eastern Quebec during the fall migration. Chapter Eleven describes hunting the Greater Snow Goose in detail.

LESSER SNOW GOOSE

A smaller relative of the Greater Snow Goose, the Lesser occupies a much larger range, nesting across the Arctic from Labrador to Alaska. The Lesser Snow Goose species also includes the Blue Goose. The latter color is evidently carried by a dominant gene, for it is gradually becoming the more common color phase. See Chapter Six for more on this case of evolution in action.

Like the Greater, the Lesser Snow Goose is an all-white bird, except for black wing primaries. These are almost out of sight when the bird is standing on the ground, but show prominently in flight. Its beak and feet are pink, and the same rust color is found very often among young birds, and less often among adults.

The “Lesser” is, in fact, not too much less. Averaging 6 pounds, Lesser Snow Geese have been weighed all the way up to 6.9 pounds for males and 6.3 for females. Thus, size alone would not distinguish the Lesser Snow Goose from the Greater. The presence of the dominant blue-phase gene in the Lesser species does differentiate them, however. There are no blue-phase Greaters!

The blue phase of the Lesser Snow Goose features a white head,

often streaked with rust and giving rise to the nickname of "cobhead." The upper half of the neck is white, but from there on down, this handsome goose is a uniform slate blue-gray color.

The Blue and Snow used to be regarded as separate species, rather than as color phases of the same bird. It was thought that the Blue and Snow nested on separate areas, only combining their flocks for the southward migration. Now we know that the two phases interbreed readily. The geese seem to be completely color-blind when it comes to selecting a mate. This is easily understood if you remember that these birds are colony nesters, sometimes nesting so close together that there are as many as 1200 pairs per square mile.

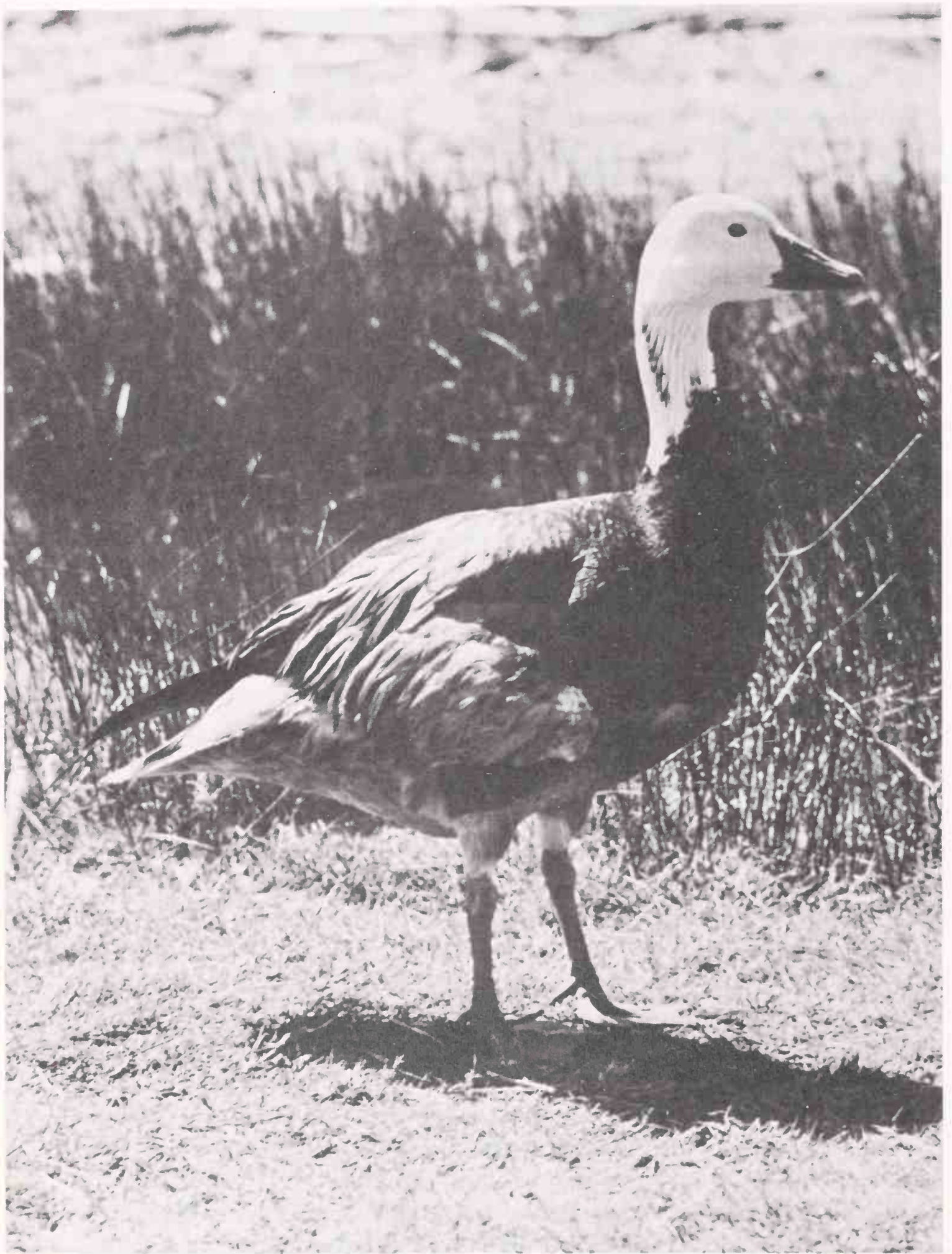
The southward migration sees very large flocks, often numbering as many as 30,000 birds in one group. Those in the center of the nation select Louisiana and Texas salt marshes and rice paddies for their wintering grounds. The flock migrating south along the Pacific Flyway favors the Central and Imperial Valleys in California, although they do winter as far north as Puget Sound, and as far south as Los Mochis in Mexico. Sizable flocks winter in the Mexican states of Coahuila and Chihuahua, also.

There is mounting belief that the blue birds winter farther north than their white siblings—which must mean that their family groups break up more easily than do family groups of Canadas. Hunting at Rancho La Estancia near Cuauhtemoc, Chihuahua, several years ago, we saw only five blue birds among an estimated ten thousand Snows. The Bosque del Apache National Wildlife Refuge on the Rio Grande in New Mexico is host to many of these geese each winter. The percentage there runs to nearly 95 percent white-phase geese.

Early in the season, Snows and Blues decoy readily; after they've been hunted for a couple of months, they seem to shy away from even the very best spread of decoys. In Mexico they believe that these geese fly away from, not toward, decoys, which is sensible because they will have been hunted for as much as seven months before the Mexican season comes to an end.

The northward migration of the Lesser Snow Geese is one of nature's grandest spectacles. The birds remain in huge flocks until they reach the vicinity of the Canadian border, pushing northward right behind the "melt" line. They often get too optimistic, or too anxious to get to the breeding grounds, and are caught in a late spring blizzard which forces them to retreat southward again in search of food.

In comparison to the Canada Goose, both Greater and Lesser Snow Geese are relatively unknown to the wildlife biologist. Their remote, inaccessible breeding grounds are the best explanation for their success in maintaining their numbers despite man's interference.



This is the blue phase of the Lesser Snow Goose—and if the present trend continues, the Lesser Snow Goose will soon be 100 percent blue.

WHITEFRONTED GEESE

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No argument here; there's only one *Anser albifrons*. For a while, some of the taxonomists resented this simplicity, so they talked of a separate race of Whitefronts which they called the Tule Goose. Fortunately that never caught on. For most of us goose hunters, a Whitefront is a Whitefront—even though we may call them Specklebellies, or Specks, or even Cacklers.

The Whitefront has yellow or orangish feet, a characteristic he shares with the Emperor Goose. His overall color is a brownish-gray, with a white patch on the front of his face—not on the cheeks like that of the Canadas. He has irregularly shaped bars of black on his breast (which gives him the Specklebelly name) and a white crescent-shaped patch on his rump. His call is a high-pitched yodel, a “toodle-oodle” sound which is difficult to imitate on commercial calls, but which the Cree Indians can duplicate using only their vocal cords.

Never very numerous in any one place, Whitefronts are, nevertheless, the world's most widely distributed geese, ranging in Africa and India as well as in North America. They nest across most of Canada's northern half and in Alaska as far south as Bristol Bay.

Migration paths for the Whitefront are ill defined, but seem to overlap all of the usual flight paths of the Canadas. Found in smaller groups than the gregarious Snows, the Whitefronts seem to enjoy their own company. They stay by themselves and are often found on the fringes of big concentrations of Snow Geese. They do, however, mingle with Canadas, perhaps because Canadas are more dignified—and less boisterous—than the Snow Geese.

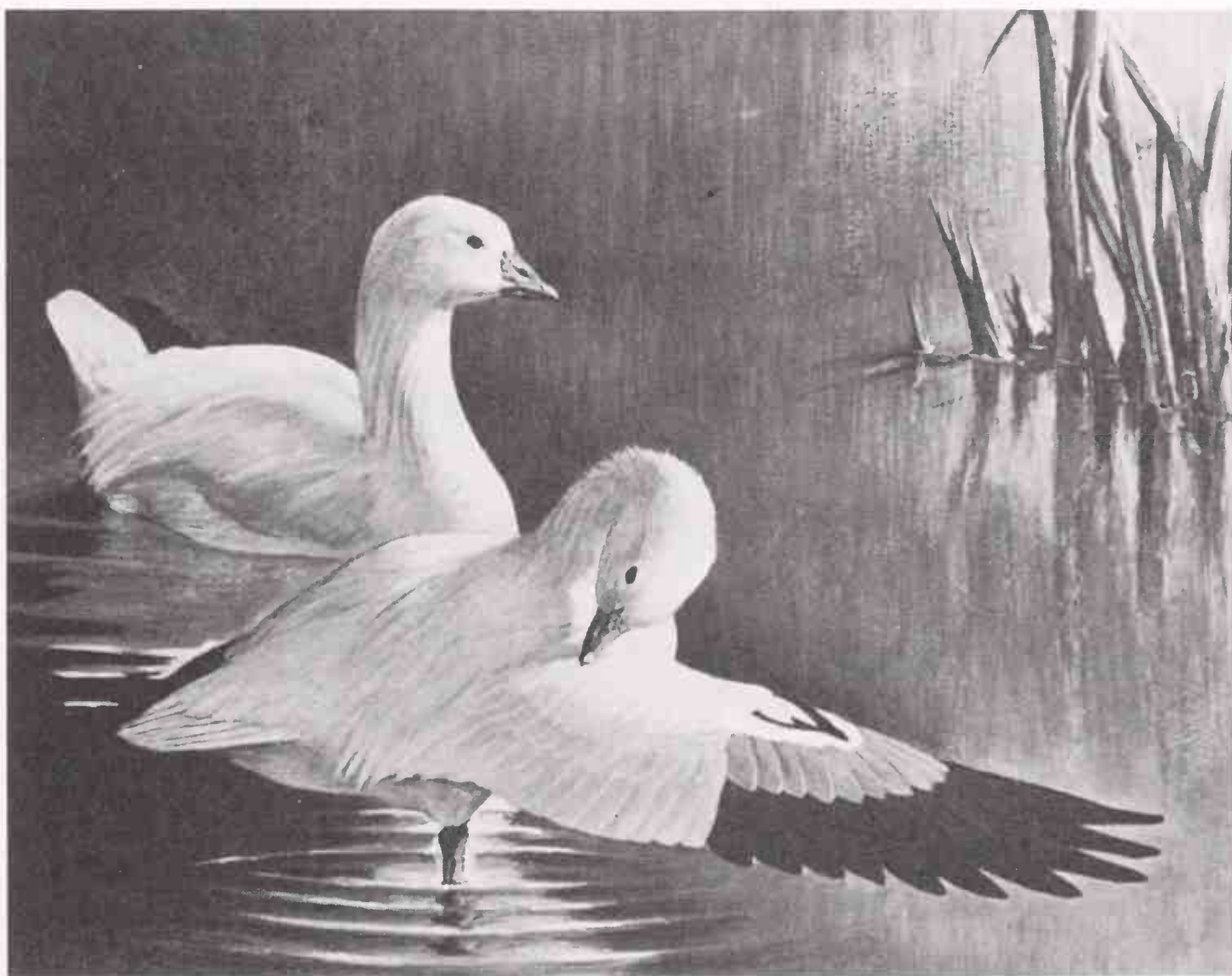
Whitefronts as heavy as 7.3 pounds have been weighed, but most of them average around the 5-pound mark. While geese are generally considered to be good fliers, the Whitefront is perhaps the most agile flier of them all. The tastiest of all geese, a real epicurean delight, the Whitefront is a prize for any hunter.

ROSS'S GOOSE

These small white geese almost escaped detection entirely. Ornithologists didn't even know that there was a *Chen rosii* until late in the game. The Ross's Goose looks almost exactly like a Snow Goose, except that it has a much shorter bill which does not show the black “lips” of the Snow Goose. Its neck is also shorter and its head more



Whitefronted Geese, also called “Specklebellies” or just “Specks,” are thought by many to be the tastiest of all geese.

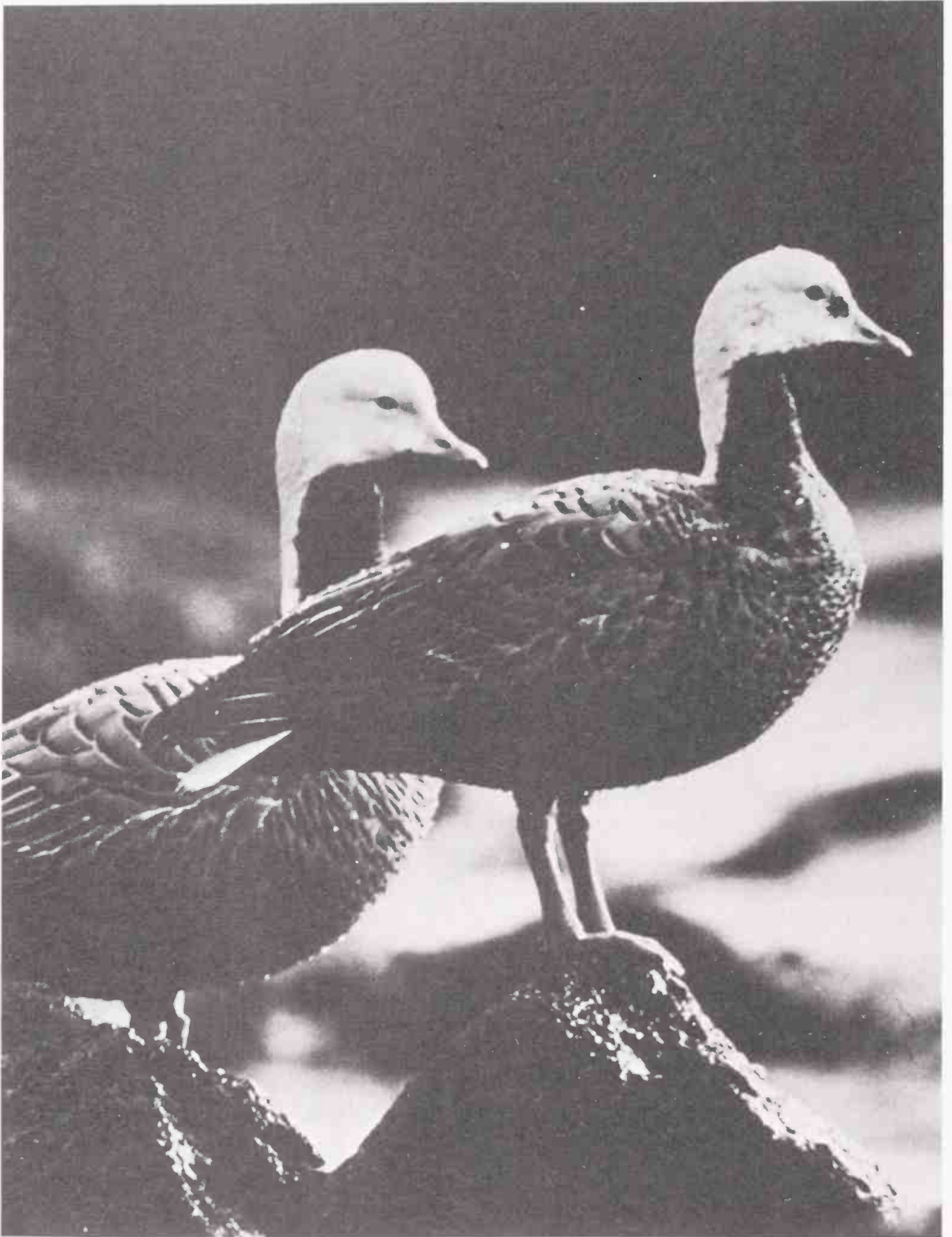


Famed wildlife artist Edward J. Bierly won the 37th annual Migratory Waterfowl Hunting Stamp Contest with this painting of Ross's Geese.

nearly round than the Snow Goose's. Generally, it is a much more compact version of the Snow Goose.

Averaging 2.8 pounds, the Ross's Goose is not much larger than a Mallard. But don't go by size alone. Some Ross's Geese have been weighed at 3.4 pounds, overlapping the range of the Lesser Snow Goose. They nest near the Snow Goose in the western half of Arctic Canada. They sometimes migrate with the Lesser Snow. Most of them winter in the central California region, the Salton Sea and the Imperial Valley. Very few follow the Central Flyway Snows down to Louisiana and Texas. But just to make a liar out of us, a flock of about 200 Ross's Geese wintered at Squaw Creek National Wildlife Refuge in Missouri in the winter of 1970.

Very little information is on hand as to the relative stability of the Ross's Goose populations. The natural tendency of hunters to shoot the biggest bird in sight works to the advantage of the Ross's Goose, since it is often the smallest bird in the flock.



Emperor Geese, photographed in the Aleutian Islands.

EMPEROR GOOSE

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Seen only by U.S. hunters when they are in Alaska, *Philacte canagica* is a very handsome blue-gray goose, splattered with black and white in distinctive patterns over most of the body. The throat is black, but the head and back of the neck are white. Like the Whitefront, the Emperor Goose has yellow or orange feet and legs. He sports a multicolored, reddish bill.

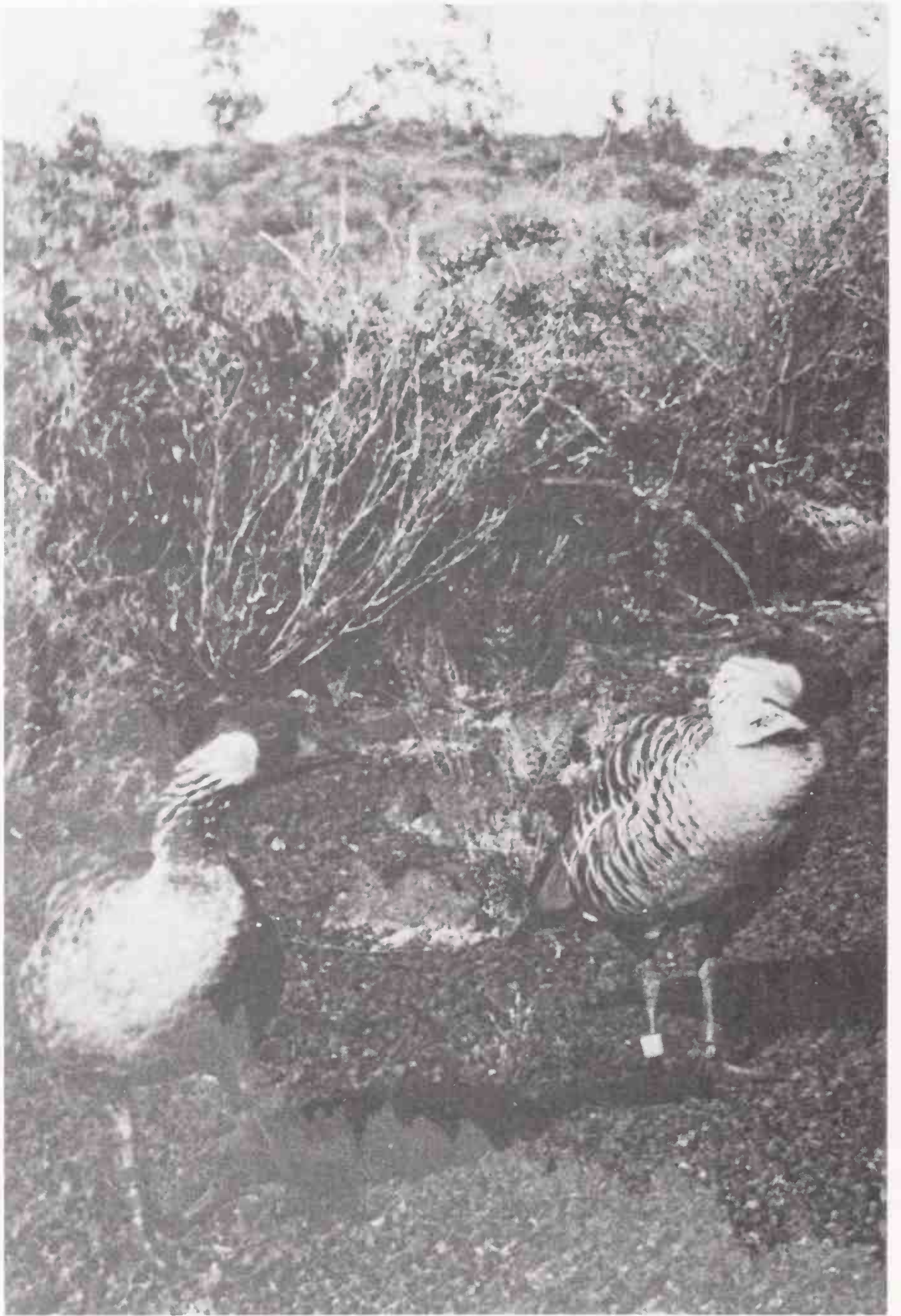
No little fellow, the Emperor weighs as much as 6.8 pounds. Since it breeds on both sides of the Bering Sea and the Chukchi Sea, we share this goose with the Soviets. Most Emperor Geese stay close to home and winter in the Aleutians. Once in a while they stray to sunny southern climes, and have been recorded as far south as California. But your chances of seeing one of these beautiful big geese outside of Alaskan waters are very remote.

BARNACLE GOOSE

Another species which is seldom encountered by the hunter is the Barnacle Goose, *Branta leucopsis*. Larger than a Brant Goose, this international goose breeds in Greenland, Spitzbergen and Novaya Zembla and usually winters in Ireland, Great Britain or Northern Europe. However, it is a remarkable traveler and has been reported in almost every state on our Atlantic Seaboard. A goose of four to four and a half pounds, it has white cheeks and forehead, and its gray upper wing coverts are tipped with black and white in an attractive pattern which sets it apart from all other geese.

NENE GOOSE

Found only in Hawaii, the Nene Goose knows a good thing when it sees it. Judging Hawaii's climate to be just about perfect, the Nene gave up migrating eons ago—if, in truth, it ever did migrate. It lives on the rough lava flows on the volcanic Hawaiian islands, and it almost never goes near the water! *Branta sandvicensis* is a strikingly beautiful goose, with black on its face and the top of its head, and cream-colored patches on its throat and the sides of its neck. The rest of its body is mottled and dark—the patches of each color being larger than is the case with either the Emperor or the Barnacle Goose.



Nene Geese on the lava slopes in Hawaii.



The Pacific variety of Black Brant, photographed on the Clarence Rhode National Wildlife Refuge in Alaska.



Atlantic Brant never stray far from salt water.

Strikingly “ungoosey” in its habits, this land-dwelling bird has been almost exterminated by dogs, cats, pigs and other mammals which were introduced to the islands. With the help of artificial propagation, the numbers of Nene Geese are increasing and they are finding new homes in Hawaiian refuges where predation is controlled. Unless you go to Hawaii, or the zoo, you’ll never see one. Even if you go to Hawaii, you cannot shoot one, for this symbol of the endangered species of Hawaii is a rare bird indeed.

THE BRANT GOOSE

There are two races of these small, dark, salt water-loving geese. The Atlantic Brant suffered a catastrophic decline in numbers due to the virtual disappearance of the salt water eelgrass, but the species seems to be slowly starting a comeback along the Atlantic Coast. The Pacific Brant also suffered from a loss of eelgrass, but to a lesser extent.

Although there are small differences in appearance—according to some taxonomists—both Brant Geese are predominantly dark birds with a slash of white on the side of the neck which does not go all the way around. Both show a marked crescent of white under the tail and on the back of the underbelly when seen from below. They are small geese, running from 2.8 pounds up to a pound more than that. Both carry their heads and necks tilted farther forward than other geese when they are on the water. The Pacific Coast race is darker on the underbelly than the Atlantic race.

Brant travel in fairly large flocks. They prefer salt or brackish water habitats to fresh water ponds and are found only along the Atlantic and Pacific Coasts.

The Early Education of a Goose Hunter

WE HAD BEEN cramped and freezing in that earthen pit for two hours when we got our first encouragement: far off, distorted by the wind, the faintest semblance of a sound—the distant talking of geese leaving Arrowwood National Wildlife Refuge north of Jamestown, North Dakota.

George pressed a warning hand against my elbow, but it wasn't really needed. I was already crouched down in the pit. He nodded to his son, Jerry, in the far pit, and they both lowered themselves, pulling the flaps over our dirt dungeons. Through the peepholes in the dark lid, we watched the thin, wavering line on the horizon grow into a flock of three hundred. They were on a course that would take them safely past us at a distance of a quarter of a mile.

"All honkers," muttered George, as he pulled a well-worn goose call from his pocket. His hands cupped over it lovingly and a faint, querulous "Ka-whunk, kaa-whunk" drifted out to call the passing flock. The geese swung in a precision turn and headed for us—wary, yet anxious to land and start feeding.

Although they had seen the decoys, the geese now began to veer away. Jerry's call went to work, and the contented gabble of a feeding flock of honkers came up from the vicinity of the decoys. Instantly the geese swung back. All of their airborne grace was gone as they bucketed the air with their wings, legs outstretched to land on the plowing and join their brethren already feeding on the green shoots of winter wheat. As the lead birds' feet touched the ground, George sprang erect, shoving the tarpaper aside, and went into action. His automatic roared twice and the two biggest geese in the world fell

among the decoys. I shifted my attention to Jerry in time to see him pour his third shot into a limping honker that was struggling to keep up with the rapidly departing flock. His first bird was about ten feet to the right of the two George had downed.

Why hadn't I shot? Simple. George and Jerry, in return for the farmer's permission to hunt on his land, had agreed to bring only two guns along. Since I was eager to learn goose hunting at the feet of the master, George had gotten permission for me to come along as observer.

"And that, my boy, is how you hunt geese," said George with a big grin of satisfaction. "You get up awful early in the morning, and set out your decoys in a feeding layout while it is still dark. You freeze for an hour in a wet hole in the ground. Then you see some geese, invite them over for breakfast and then act plumb rude to them. Then you pick up your birds and your decoys and go home. It's quite simple."

Now I thought I knew all about it. I had heard the plaint of the greatest of Canadian *voyageurs*, thrilled to the sight of three hundred honkers coming into the gun, felt the excitement mounting as they came into range, and had joined in the exultant yells as the big birds thumped onto the frozen ground. I was hooked. It was too late now to ever be content with hunting lesser birds. I was an addicted goose hunter.

During the next two weeks I had good luck at duck and pheasant shooting. The sloughs were full and ducks plentiful. Mallard drakes, green heads gleaming, were the birds I had always thought of as the most beautiful of waterfowl. Now they suddenly seemed kind of small and penny-ante. The pheasant is the most beautiful of upland game birds. He's big, tasty and a fast flyer with a whole bag of tricks with which to confound the hunter who seeks him. Not even Solomon in all his glory was as handsomely arrayed as the cock pheasant. But now he seemed like a piddling target, unworthy of a great hunter. I kept dreaming of great flocks of Canada Geese swinging into a properly arranged spread of decoys and remembering the heft of those grand birds as we carried them to the car.

I spent my rent money on fifteen of the best decoys on the market and a reliable, never-fail goose call. I called my favorite hunting partner and tried to line him up for an early-morning excursion, before we went to work. He laughed at my enthusiasm and hinted strongly that I didn't know the meaning of the phrase "wild goose chase." None of my regular hunting pals were having any. They were content with the plentiful ducks and pheasants, and it was only a few miles west to good Sharptailed Grouse hunting. Why should they waste

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28 time on an iffy activity like goose hunting? It was okay with me if they were content with their piddling game. I wanted geese!

Monday morning at 5:30 I got out of my car into the blackest, coldest night I had ever seen. I quickly learned that a vest full of No. 2's, fifteen decoys, a gun and a thermos full of coffee made a man slightly cumbersome. I tripped in the ditch, scraped a yard of skin off my nose on the weeds, tore my pants on the fence and stumbled out into the plowing. I went as far from the car as my heavy load would permit and began to stake out my decoys. Determined to take every precaution, I didn't use my flashlight. As a result, I dropped a decoy, tripped over it and plowed through the skin of ice on a water-filled furrow with my nose. My wet trousers quickly froze into a replica of medieval armor, effectively stopping the wind.

I finished my stakeout, found a fairly dry furrow to lie down in, and covered up with a piece of black tarpaper. The dawn seemed very slow in coming that morning. I looked at my watch six times before I noticed any movement of the hands. Even when the sun finally appeared and the black tarpaper actually got warm, there were still no signs of geese. The morning was half over; certainly the geese had long since gone out to feed, and I hadn't seen or heard one.

Wearily I gathered up my equipment and went home. George called a few minutes after I got there. After hearing all about my rotten luck, he said, "Yeah, they all went out west this morning!"

At 4:00 that afternoon I was parked on a knoll overlooking the south end of the refuge. At 4:15 the flocks began coming back. Through binoculars, I studied their flight paths. All of the geese, several thousands, seemed to come from the west.

At the highest point of land to the west of the refuge, all flight paths seemed to converge on a cornfield. Flock after flock passed over it about fifty feet in the air. I drove over and sweet-talked the farmer into giving me permission to hunt there the next morning.

Tuesday morning I was already profiting by experience. I got out of bed an hour later and got set up about ten minutes before the first gray of dawn. When my watch showed legal sunrise, the birds showed up. They came west by the thousands. They all passed within a quarter of a mile of me, bellies almost sweeping the tops of the corn. When I honked my goose call they all zoomed wildly, going into immediate evasive action and putting distance between me and them as fast as their great wings would take them. I put the goose call away.

Noting that all of the geese had gone over one particular spot, I got down on all fours and covered ground in a way which must have set a new speed record for all-fours crawling, impeded with gun. When I was settled at the new spot, the last flock left the refuge. They passed



Canada Geese coming to decoys in a North Dakota field, one of the “heart-stopping” sights in the world of waterfowling.

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30 over the exact spot I had just vacated! Their bellies almost scraped the corn, but they didn't even look at the spread of decoys that I had abandoned.

I gave up. Halfway back to the highway I met a young farm boy carrying two geese. We stopped to exchange professional secrets. He had gotten his geese by lying in a ditch a good mile away from the refuge fence and shooting "mile high" geese with BB's in a ten-gauge with 32-inch barrels. My twelve-gauge pump suddenly seemed very inadequate.

As I set the alarm for another daybreak mission, I received a lecture about what kind of people would go on taking that sort of punishment for a possible shot at a bird. I realized that my wife had never heard the big fellows talking as they came into a decoy spread. I smiled a patronizing, pitying smile and went to sleep.

Bright and early Wednesday morning—well, early anyway—I was in the ditch on a country road to the south of the refuge. The geese came right out over me. Like precision flyers, they swept on across the prairie in my direction. Vee after vee of Canadas—both the big ones and the little fellows we called "Hutch's" in those days—a scattering of Whitefronts and, surprisingly, a good bunch of Snows with one or two of the newly discovered "Blue Goose" species among them. The only trouble was that their altimeters were set at 250 yards above the ground.

Wednesday afternoon I bought a phonograph record on goose calling. For three hours I made the air hideous with assorted squawks, screams and hisses. One of the neighbors reported me to the SPCA, charging vivisection of a cat. By 8:30 I thought I had it down pat, so I called George on the phone for an audition. He said I had it about right, but not to overdo it. "Just one or two calls, and never call when they're coming your way—not until you get to be an expert," he warned.

Thursday morning found me back at my original spot with my decoys lovingly placed. Each honker, whether feeding or standing erect, faced into the general direction of the wind. The first flocks came out in different directions, as there was no wind that morning. Under a warm sun, a group of twenty Canadas appeared—heading right at me! My heart began to hammer in my chest. I knew they would be within easy range of my No. 2 shot. But when they were still about one hundred yards off, they suddenly flared up and away, scrambled for altitude and went past me out of range. Several times more that morning a big flock headed right for me, answered my dulcet calling without reluctance and then dodged off again at the last minute. I gave up and headed for town—sick with disappointment.

I went to talk it over with George. He was showing two Snows and a Hutchins's Goose to admiring neighbors. I told him what had happened to me that morning. He asked to look at my decoys. He quickly reached a verdict: "You'll never fool a goose with those fakes. What you need is a handful of pumice and some lampblack—your decks are too shiny." So we doctored the decoys. Now I had ironed out the last flaw. I was sure that success would soon be mine.

Once more I went through the ritual of winding the alarm, got an insufficient four hours of sleep and was off again into the predawn darkness. On the way to the refuge I had a flat tire. Changing the tire made me about half an hour late reaching the field. In a hurry to get set, I grabbed only five decoys and started to run. I tripped and fell, right in the center of the bare pasture! Decoys lay all about me, scattered in confusion. And the geese were coming—about one hundred of them! I reached for my goose call, but it lay ten feet away where I had dropped it. I got up and walked over to get it, in plain sight of the honkers, who were only two hundred yards out. When I picked up the call, they were still coming in, so I hunkered down. They came on, blind to the man squatting in plain sight in the bare pasture. They went over me not twenty yards up!

I jumped up, picked the leader and shot. Feathers flew! He lurched in the air, but he didn't come down. I shot again, and down he came. I picked another and had the satisfaction of seeing it crumple and join the leader on the bare grass pasture. It's a good thing no one was near enough to see or hear. I whooped and yelled like a lunatic and did a war dance around my two geese.

Back home, when admiring neighbors asked me how I got the birds, I leaned back against the house wall and said, "Well, you get up early in the morning, and freeze for an hour or two after setting out your decoys. Spot some geese, call them over to join you for breakfast and then act plumb rude to them. Then you pick up the whole works and go home. That's the way you do it."

And quietly, to myself only, I added, "And if you're crazy, it sure doesn't hurt your chances!"

Goose Decoys and Goose Calls

THERE WAS a light skift of snow on the sere New Mexican landscape and a biting wind to greet us as we climbed to the top of the hill where we could see the irrigated meadows below. About four thousand Canadas were busily feeding, plucking the green shoots of the winter wheat below us. They were about a quarter of a mile away. Any sneak approach was ruled out by the flatness of the terrain and the absence of any vegetation to hide behind.

“Duck soup,” declared George Case. “We’ll have limits and be on our way home inside of an hour.” It was now 11:30 on a bright Bluebird day, and I felt that he was being very optimistic. But I had learned to trust George Case, who is my *consuegro*, where goose hunting is concerned.

In case your Spanish is rusty, *consuegros* are two people whose children have married each other. My son married George’s daughter, earning me an introduction to the best goose hunter in New Mexico. George had been hunting geese in this sector of the Land of Enchantment since he was old enough to carry a shotgun—and his father, Bill Case, had hunted there even longer. Now 83, Bill still takes his share of the big honkers who end their southward migration in northeastern New Mexico.

George shouldered his Remington 1100, chambered for 3-inch magnum shells, a sack of decoys and a shovel. I brought up the rear carrying another sack of decoys and my Browning Autoloader. George gave the orders and we went to work with practiced speed.

First we scared the geese off by walking directly toward them. They took flight with raucous complaints about having their lunch interrupted. Secondly, we put the decoys on the edge of a grass area, which



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34 had been kept green through two months of freezing weather by warmer irrigation water. While George manned the shovel, I set two dozen shell-body decoys, the kind that nest easily over one another when the head and neck are removed. I put them in a loose scatter; no one bird nearer than eight feet to another, all facing (roughly) into the wind, some with heads bent down to simulate feeding, some with erect necks as if on guard duty.

When I relieved him on the shovel, George brought tumbleweeds to stick into the fresh earth I had banked up in front of our pit. "Pit" is too ambitious a word—this was just a shallow trench which gave us a place to kneel. With bent backs, we'd be almost out of sight. The shovel went into the furrow behind us, its shiny blade covered with mud. The decoy sacks became kneeling pads. We loaded up with No. 4 shot and got into our pit. It was a quarter past twelve—not the best time for goose hunters. It was just an hour since we had chased the birds off. The sun was brilliant, and the reflections off the snow forced me to don sunglasses to keep from squinting.

"There's a big lake over two miles south of here," George explained, "and probably that's where they're resting. Most of it has frozen up, so they'll be standing on the ice near some open water. Day like today, it might be open all around the edges. But I think those birds kinda like this green stuff, and they weren't done feeding. They'll be back soon."

He was right. At 12:33 we saw the first Canadas, low on the horizon, winging our way. George flipped his goose call to the outside of his hunting coat, ready to use. As long as the geese headed our way, he was silent, except for an excited "Get down!" directed at me. That warning was totally unnecessary; I was already burying my face in the fresh earth. I kept my shiny glasses down, leaving the decisions to the Master. The sounds of oncoming geese grew louder, then it sounded as if they were going to turn away. George gave a couple of melodious "ka-whonks" and was answered by excited calling from the flock above. They turned and came circling to get in position to land upwind. Three times the questioning "ka-whunk?" came from the flock as they neared. Each time George answered with a reassuring "ka-whonk" of his own.

"You ready?" George whispered. "They're coming right in!"

"Say when," I hissed back at him.

"Let's take 'em!"

We came up shooting from the kneeling position. It was almost too easy. Five big honkers had lit in the decoys! On all sides, the big birds flailed the air with their wings, striving for altitude. I picked a bird twenty yards above me and dropped him, swung to a second bird,

which I passed up as being too small, sought out a big one and slipped him a load of chilled 4's.

I heard George shooting and knew from past experience that he wasn't going to miss shots like that. We each had the New Mexico limit of two dark geese on the ground.

"Stay down!" George said, and I ducked back into concealment.

"What for?" I asked. "We got our limit."

"Yeah, I know," he said, "but I want to show you something."

The flock we had shot into was circling well to the north of us, but other flocks were coming out from the lake. George talked sweet talk to the new flocks, inviting them down to join our deeks. He didn't overdo it, just talked to the birds that seemed to be having trouble making up their minds. If they were coming in, he didn't need to call. At least one hundred birds actually landed among our decoys!

On the ground, the live birds seemed to be totally oblivious to the fakes. They walked past them, fed within two feet of them, paid absolutely no attention to them. While we watched, the feeding birds came back to their interrupted lunch and all of the four thousand from the lake again spread out across the irrigated land, feeding contentedly.

We eased into erect positions, taking the strain off our aching backs. Some of the birds closest to us walked warily away, looking back at us. By moving very slowly, we were able to reach a sitting position outside of the blind—without frightening the geese! They didn't spook until we went out to pick up the decoys. Even then we were able to stack our deeks and walk away without flushing the birds on the other end of the field.

That's how it is supposed to work. But only too seldom does everything fall into place so perfectly. Why was that hunt so successful?

First, we were in the right place. You can't hunt geese where there aren't any. We had seen the birds leave that eating place, and had put our spread right where they had chosen to land before.

Second, the caller was an expert, and he didn't overdo it.

Third, our blind was of natural materials, placed where it would attract the least possible notice—in the dead-furrow at the side of the field.

Fourth, tumbleweeds, which look right at home in New Mexico, broke our silhouette.

Fifth, we didn't move a muscle while the birds were looking us over.

Sixth, the decoy spread was properly arranged, in addition to being properly placed. Proper placement of the decoys is much more important than the actual "genuine-looking" nature of the individual decoys. Flying high above, the birds cannot pick out the details of a

36 fancy paint job, they get only a quick impression. That quick look told them that there were twenty-four Canada Geese down there feeding. So they came down to join in the feast. It's as simple as that.

How authentic do goose decoys have to be?

My answer is, "Not very authentic at all." To back up this opinion, let's take a look at the most common—and most successful—types of goose decoys.

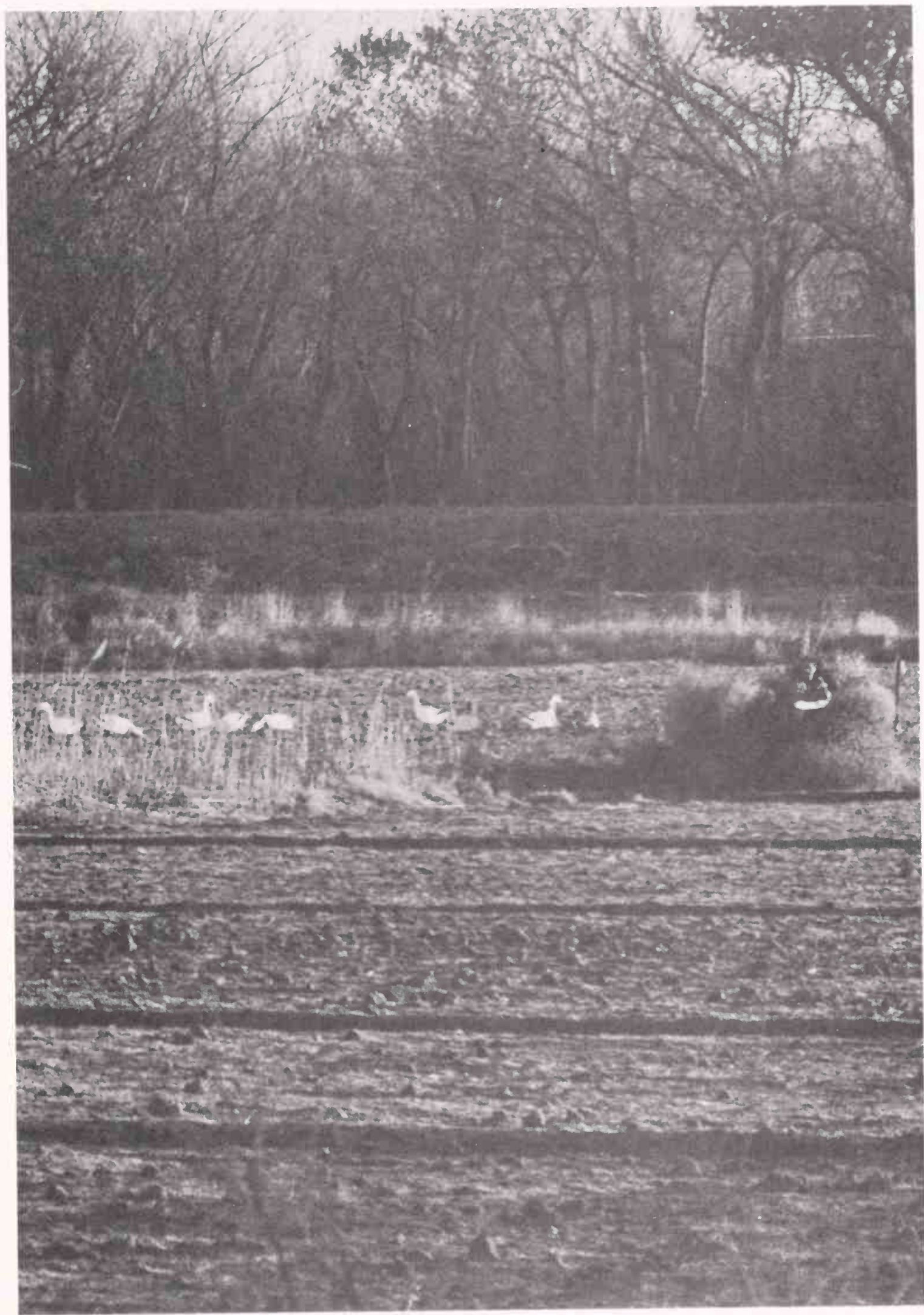
Easiest to carry and easy to place, fiberboard or pressed-paper silhouettes are erected by inserting a stake with a crossbar between the two sides, spreading the sides apart and then sticking the stake in the ground. These decoys are excellent; one hunter can tote three dozen of them under one arm while walking out to the field. From a distance, they are very lifelike. Seen from directly above, they appear much too thin, but the wild goose is only above one or, at the most, two at one time. The other decoys look like normal geese, as they are seen from one side or the other. The only time this type of decoy is poor is when you are hunting in a hard wind, which blows them around too much.

Some old-timers use straight, one-dimensional silhouettes. Usually sawed from plywood, these decoys are built with an integral stake to drive into the ground to support them. Although heavy and hard to carry, these decoys serve well when they can be left out in the field. They don't look lifelike, but they work. And that's what counts!

Next step up the line is the full-bodied shell decoy. These are hollow, so a dozen or more can be nested one inside the other, if the heads are carried in a separate bag. They are usually equipped with detached internal stakes so that they can be mounted in the standing position. Most hunters omit the stake entirely, and the shell decoy does look very natural "sitting" on the field. Usually half of the neck sections are in the feeding position, half are erect. The lifelike appearance of the spread can be increased by putting some of the decoys on their stakes, as if they were standing. In a strong wind, all decoys are placed on stakes, to prevent them from blowing away.

Even more lifelike are the full-bodied solids. Made of heavy fiber or even of wood, these perfectly made, perfectly painted, accurately sized decoys look so much like the real thing that you will find novice hunters attempting to sneak up on your spread—even after examining the decks through binoculars. The acme of this type of goose decoy is on display every November at the Easton Waterfowl Show at Easton, Maryland. This show, held on the first full weekend in November, presents the very best—historical and contemporary—in the fine art of carving decoys. The show is well worth a trip.

These solid, non-nesting, non-collapsible decoys take up a lot of



Hunters use tumbleweeds for a blind in a field in which geese have been feeding. Decoys are set to bring the birds in over the blind.



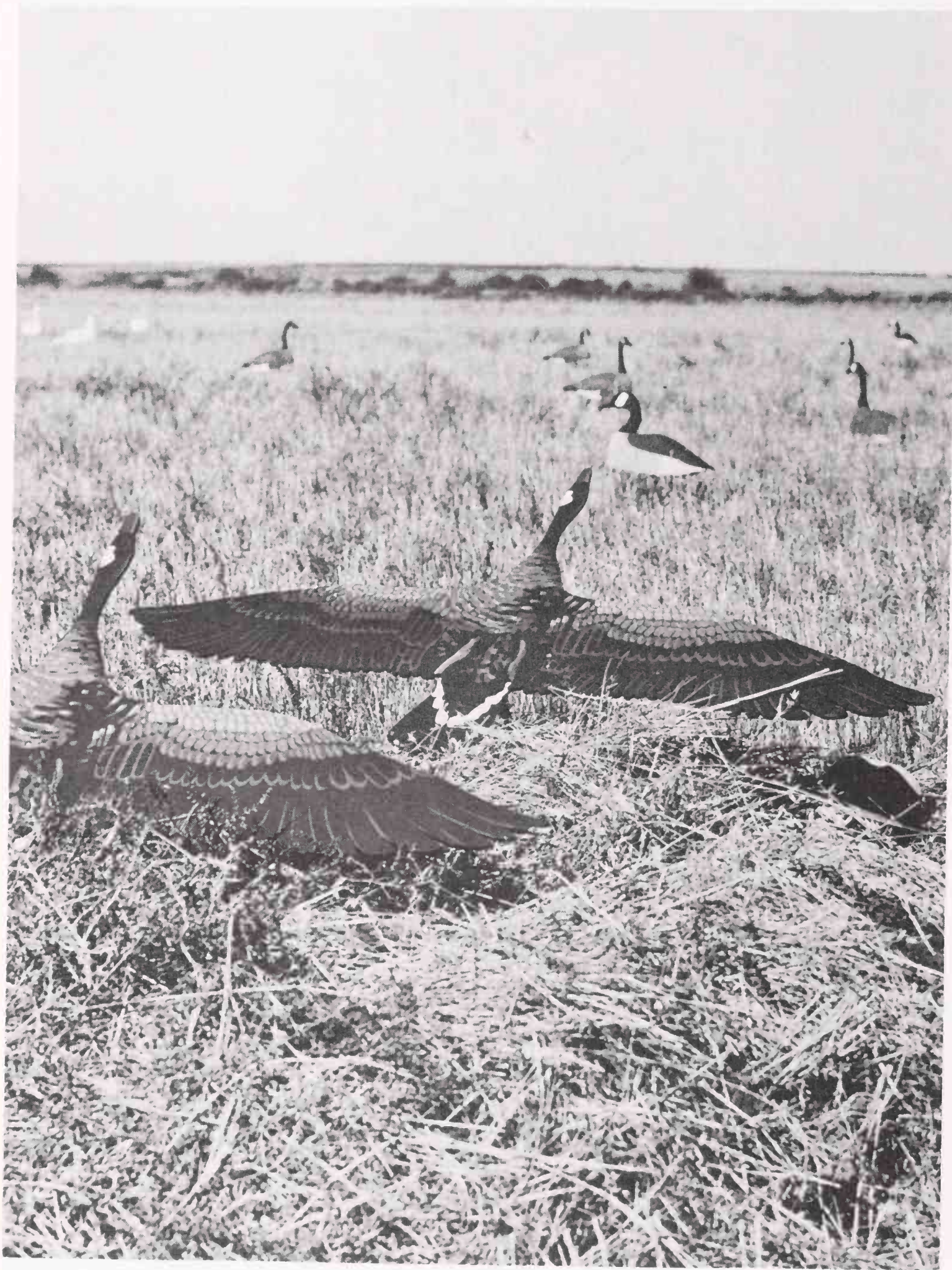
The author is carrying two dozen silhouette decoys in the two white bags over his shoulder. Light in weight, easily portable, they make setting up a big spread almost pleasant.



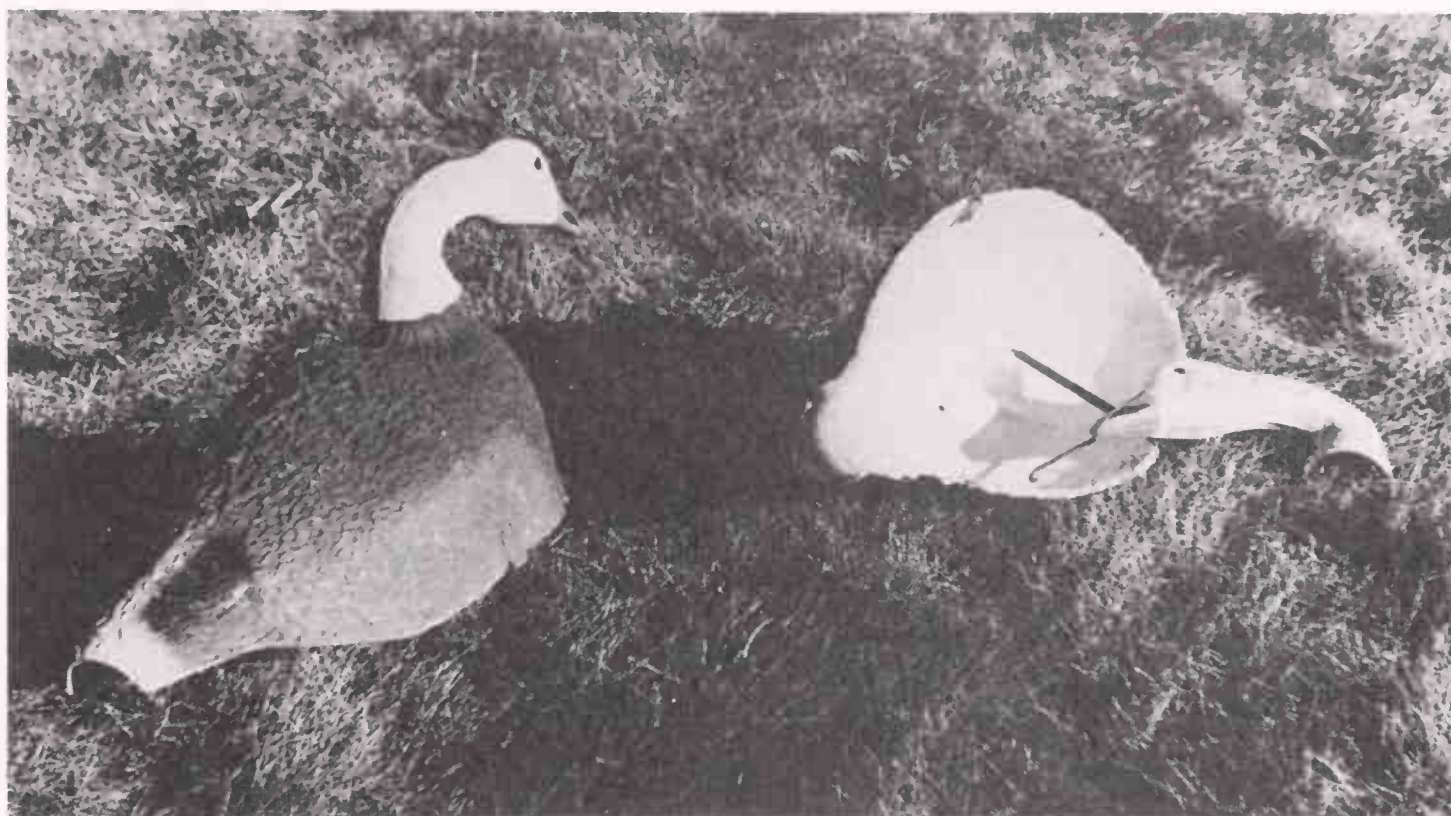
The author checks placement of silhouette Canada Geese in a New Mexican field. As a general rule — there are exceptions — all geese decoys face in the same direction, into the wind.



Dan Cadieux sets out pressed-paper silhouettes in a grainfield near Ute Lake, New Mexico.



Note the flat, one-dimensional Canada decoys which complement the full-body deeks beyond. The dark spot under the right wing of the flat decoy is a hunter's head. He's completely hidden in a pit in a stubblefield in North Dakota.



Full-bodied shells. The bodies nest one inside the other, and the head goes on as an afterthought. The whole works is anchored by a steel stake which spreads the inside of the body.



Sometimes you get caught out of your blind. These hunters are placing their decoy spread a little late, with geese already in the air.



A West Coast hunter sets out decoys for the Pacific Black Brant.



Limned by flying spray, a West Coast hunter places decoys for a day's hunting of Pacific Black Brant.



Making full-bodied solid wood decoys with a hatchet.



A splendid collection of waterfowl decoys, displayed on the sides of an old-time sink-box boat, as used in the Chesapeake Bay. Note the Atlantic Brant decoys in the center of the front row.



White paper napkins, rubber-banded atop stakes, make effective white goose decoys for Jim Keefe.

room. Even a big station wagon can't carry more than a dozen. This lack of portability restricts their use to areas where they can be put out and left, or in situations where there is plenty of room to carry decoys. In some of the great goose marshlands along the Eastern Shore of Maryland, hunting is done from permanent blinds. Transportation to these blinds is usually by boat—such as an oyster-tonger or other waterman's craft—which can carry all the decoys you can afford to have around. Some of the solids, practical everyday decoys for such a situation, have been used by the same family for four or five generations. That's proof that they work. If they didn't, they wouldn't be kept in a Maryland goose camp!

Most realistic of all the decoys I've used are the big inflatable rubber geese I bought years ago from a company in Nebraska. Completely authentic down to their molded black feet (with toenails), the beautifully painted birds were hard to tell from a live Canada at a distance. I don't believe they are available now. The company that made mine has been driven out of business by the competition—which made an inferior product at a much lower price.

My inflatables had two drawbacks. First of all, although I'm considered to be rather windy, I got dizzy from blowing them up on cold November mornings. Second, a strong wind would set them to bouncing, rhythmically, back and forth against the solid anchor of the stakes which protruded from below the webbed feet. Also, when it rained they got shiny wet. They didn't look good wet; but they worked whether it was wet or dry, nevertheless.

Ever see a goose big enough to hide a 200-pound hunter inside? Neither have I, but I've seen decoys that big. One or two of these giants can greatly increase the attractiveness of a normal-sized spread, simply because they can be seen from such a great distance. Wild birds evidently forget that big one when they get in close. The gimmick is so effective that the Fish and Wildlife Service has outlawed its use.

A Maryland friend of mine, who used the giant decoys with great success, told me that he has worked out a theory as to why they work. "Remember the joke about 'where does a 300-pound gorilla sleep'? The answer was—'Anywhere he wants to sleep.' Well, I figure the wild geese think that this goose is so big that no one or nothing could challenge him—so they come down to feed and rest in the safety and protection of Super Goose."

And would you believe a decoy that flies? Innovative hunters on the Snow Goose prairies of South Central Texas have added a kite, painted to resemble a Snow Goose—or at least with the Snow Goose's black and white pattern—to their decoy spread. When the wind is right, they fly their kite over their spread of decks. Two or three of

48 these kites, flying over a big spread of Snows and Blues, will often outdraw similar spreads without fliers. It is certain that they attract the attention of the wild birds, and that is the big first part of any decoy spread.

Snow Geese are among the most expert fliers in the world. For this reason I do not subscribe to the theory that the Snows think that one of their number has mastered the Hummingbird's art of flying in one place—and that they come over to see how he does it.

THE CHEAP IMITATIONS

The decoys we have discussed are all made for the purpose, they all are effective and they all cost money. But there are ways to decoy geese which cost little or nothing.

In the James Bay area, Cree Indian hunters use the wings saved from a day's kill as decoys for the next day's hunting. A pair of wings, bones forced into a clod of dirt, can look very much like a Snow Goose when viewed from 300 yards away while flying at 35 miles per hour. They work! However, as I mentioned, the Crees also have the ability to call geese to the gun, using only their God-given vocal cords. Even very poor decoys would probably work for them, for the caller convinces the wild bird that he is hearing another live bird, making it easy to believe that the counterfeit his eye sees is truly a live goose.

On the muddy rice fields of Texas, hunters use white paper napkins stuck down with a gob of mud. Some of them get very artistic, using black dirt and white napkins to fashion a fairly lifelike decoy. Others simply drop the paper napkins flat on the ground on windless days. They work, as you will see in Chapter Ten. Paper plates are another ploy that works. I've hunted Blue and Snow Geese over a "spread" that was made up of 200 paper plates. We killed geese, too. Newspapers have been successfully used to simulate a flock of feeding geese. If a few full-bodied shells are stuck up in and around the newspapers, or paper napkins, or paper plates, the results are even better.

On the Bosque del Apache National Wildlife Refuge, a very popular limited permit hunt is conducted every year, which I describe in Chapter Nine. For this hunt, they use a piece of plastic with a white matte finish. Cut in the shape of a "Y" with a wide base, the plastic is folded over so that the top prongs of the letter overlap. Then the plastic is stapled. This gives a three-dimensional look to the creation. Although it lacks any sign of a head or neck, it brings in the Snows and Blues.

Most of these makeshift decoys are used to lure the gregarious, talkative, not-quite-so-bright Snow Goose, rather than the Canada or Whitefronted Goose. Probably the Snow Goose is no more stupid than the Canada. After two weeks of prayer and fasting, I still cannot come up with any definite proof that the Canada is smarter—but I still think he is. The Snow Goose is a sucker for a large collection of white shapes down there on the ground. This is to be expected; he travels in huge flocks, hates to be alone and pitches right in to join a crowd. The more aristocratic Canada usually spurns the company of the noisy Snows and Blues—usually, but not always. A quieter bird, he speaks a different language and his traveling groups are much smaller than the white bird's. As for the Whitefront, it is my opinion that he is the least apt to decoy of all the geese that inhabit North America. Even when I lay out a big spread of decoys which look like Whitefronts, he usually stays away. If anyone knows what I'm doing wrong, I'd sure like to hear about it.

The Whitefront also sounds different from the other geese. Each species speaks its own language. The higher-pitched, warbling "toodle-oodle" of the Whitefront is difficult to imitate, and the sound simply cannot be made right on a typical Canada Goose call. I don't know of more than five goose hunters who do a good job of talking Whitefront language.

GOOSE CALLS

Come to think of it, I know very few good goose callers at all, compared to the thousands who chase geese away with their calls. I'm willing to bet that goose calls chase away ten times as many geese as are called to the gun. Most guides prefer that their customers leave the call at home—and they're right oftener than not. Yet a *good* caller has it all over the man without a call.

If you are determined to become a good goose hunter, you must become a good caller. It is not going to be easy, nor can you accomplish it the weekend before goose season opens. Start early and work at it. There are thousands of good calls—I've had the best luck with those made by Olt and by Falk. Get the phonograph record or tape cassette which is offered for sale where you buy your call. Listen to the sounds made by expert callers, on the record and in the field. Try to imitate them. It is very difficult to judge for yourself when you are getting the sound right. If you have a tape recorder, record your best efforts and then play them back alongside the calls of the experts.

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Listen to the wild birds as they fly over, and try to imitate them. There cannot be a more expert teacher. Zoo birds or game preserve birds are of little help, for they have lost the sound of the wild aristocrat who rides the wind down from the far northern breeding grounds each fall.

Remember the corny joke about the man asking directions in New York City? Not knowing he was talking to a concert violinist, he asked, "How do you get to Carnegie Hall?" The answer was to the point, "Practice, sir, practice." That's good advice for the man who wants to get to Carnegie Hall. It also is good advice for the budding goose caller.

There's one more bit of advice about goose calling. It is summed up in one word. You'd be surprised at how often it fits the situation. That one word is: *Don't*.



World Champion goose caller Frank A. Heidelberg—who won the title in 1953 and 1954—gave me this call for Blue and Snow Geese. Most calls that make an authentic sound of a Canada will not do well on the Blues and Snows.

WHERE AND HOW TO SET GOOSE DECOYS 51

The location of your spread is the most important single part of decoying geese. If you put decoys in a parking lot, they obviously won't draw birds. The same is true of many rural situations. Decoys placed in a farm shelterbelt, close to the trees, will obviously not draw geese. Geese don't use places like that. Put your decoys in a logical place, where geese could be expected to be. Better yet, put your decoys where you *saw* geese feeding.

Don't place decoys close to hiding places which could harbor a predator. The goose is not stupid enough to land close to a hedgerow which might conceal a coyote, fox, bobcat—or hunter. True, if the only food is near the hedgerow, the goose may land and walk slowly and cautiously over to the food—but he'll land at a safe distance.

Don't place decoys so close together that it is difficult or impossible for a live bird to land among them.

Do leave an opening in the spread of decoys which invites the birds to land there—and have that opening within range of your gun.

Use large spreads for Snows and Blues; **use smaller spreads** for Canadas and Whitefronts, to match the traveling habits of the different species. Snows fly in crowds; they look for crowds. Dark geese, even when they number in the hundreds of thousands—as they do in the Chester River country of Maryland—seem to travel in family groups (or groups of three or four families) numbering from eight to thirty birds. These traveling groups are the targets your decoys want to attract—not the hundreds of thousands.

Fit your decoy spread to the occasion. We often hunt Canadas late in the season along small streams, where mountain-fed creeks provide open water. We've had good luck planting just four or five decoys near open water—leaving room for others to land right at the water's edge. We've had much less luck if we put out two dozen or more decoys in that situation. Perhaps the Canada doesn't want to be crowded.

Don't move. Most failures to decoy are caused not by the decoys, but by sunlight glinting off glasses or a gun barrel, or by the sudden white spot caused when a pale face is turned skyward. Keep your face in the shadow, wear camouflage and above all—*keep still*. Like all wild things, geese are alert to movement and suspicious of it.

Obviously, there are many other types of decoys which we haven't talked about. You've met some of them in earlier chapters and you'll meet others later on. They all work; some work better than others. But authentic goose decoys provide greater pride of ownership and increased enjoyment in using them. To me, that is worth the added time and expense in gathering good ones.



In Summary:

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1. Put your decoys in areas the geese are "using."
2. Place decoys in such a way that geese are invited to land within the range of your gun, and within the limit of your shooting ability. Close birds are easier to kill than distant ones.
3. Use more decoys for Snows and Blues; fewer for Canadas and Whitefronted Geese.
4. Don't overdo the calling. If they're coming—shut up.
5. Wear camouflage clothing, keep the blind natural in appearance.
6. Don't move.

The sight of a flock of geese coming to your decoys is one of the most beautiful sights in the outdoor world. When they set their wings in that final approach glide, you have won the battle. The hardest part is over—calling them to your decoys, fooling them completely. After that accomplishment, the shooting is easy and even anticlimactic.

But it is also what we're after, isn't it?

Honkers in a Bay Snowstorm

A WATERMAN ought to know better than to trust the weather forecast on television, but it was on the basis of Channel Nine's forecast that Jeb Stockam had taken the day off from oystering. When the tube said that it would be cold, overcast and windy, with a chance of rain turning to snow, he figured that this would be his best chance of bagging a goose for Christmas. Besides, he was getting mighty tired of "drudgin' arsters." (That's what writers claim Eastern Shore watermen call the work of scraping Chesapeake Bay oysters off the bottom.)

As he headed his skiff out of Knapp's Narrows, bound into the big estuary of the Choptank, he overtook the *Sigsbee* and waved to Captain Wade Murphy. The *Sigsbee*'s big white "5" license square showed up well in the pre-dawn light. She made a pretty picture heeling to the strong breeze out of the northwest. Off to the east, he could make the sail of another skipjack. It looked like the *Hilda M. Willing*, but he couldn't be sure.

Jeb worked most winters on oystering skipjacks, down on his knees picking oysters from the shells that came up with the dredge. Like it said in "The Oyster Dredger's Lament," "My knees was growing heels and toes." It did get tiresome, especially working for somebody else, hoping that the time would come when you could buy your own boat and do your own oystering. But after ten years of marriage he knew that there was a fat chance of ever buying a boat—not with a wife and three kids to feed and clothe and send to school, not with the way prices were going.

Even today, he felt kind of guilty for taking a day off to go hunting. Old-time ethics about work and idleness were still strongly held on the

Eastern Shore. He had little respect for a man who would take a day off to go hunting, when he had a good chance to make wages out oystering.

Jeb was a rarity among watermen, in that he read a lot. When the boat got in and the oysters were unloaded, he would sit with his nose poked into a book until tired eyes forced him to give it up and turn in to get ready for the next day's work. Like most watermen, he couldn't earn a living by following just one kind of work. He took dudes from Washington, D.C., out bluefishing at times, and guided hunters for a farmer living near Chance. He ran his own crab traps when the time was right and did a lot of crab trotlining, too. When you got right down to it, crabs were his main occupation. But there's more money in oystering, when both the oysters and the price cooperate.

Jeb headed south, watching Wade Murphy start a dredging run east. The *Sigsbee* worked across the wind like a musician playing a violin, dredges working just right. "Right about where he's scratching bottom," Jeb thought, "right about there is where that writer Michener put his imaginary Devon Island, cept'n there never was no such thing as Devon Island." Michener had studied the people of the Eastern Shore, Jeb knew. "He got most things right about us watermen," Jeb thought, "but that feller Warner who wrote that book about blue crabs—that guy got it all right about us watermen. Beautiful Swimmers! Strange name for a crab, 'cuz he may be delicious and he sure is cantankerous and ornery, but beautiful is something he ain't."

His own skipper had grumbled mightily about having to take a replacement while Jeb took the day off. "Oughta get a full 115 bushels tomorrow, Jeb, and you need your share of that more than you need any damned goose," Captain Bill had told him.

Jeb 'lowed as how Captain Bill was right, but he also knew that it was a case of shoot your own goose or else eat softshells for Christmas dinner. Softshells are mighty good eating, but they don't seem to fit for Christmas, not even in Knapp's Narrows. Pricing turkeys at the supermarket in Easton, he had decided that he needed to shoot a goose. It wasn't so much a case of wanting to, he told himself. He needed to!

Nosing his boat into the first of the myriad coves on the south side of the Choptank, Jeb went looking for geese. He found them, for there were more than half a million geese wintering on the Delmarva Peninsula. Most wintered up north of the Bay Bridge, but a lot of them were at Bombay Hook, Brigantine and Blackwater Refuges. 'Course a man couldn't hunt there. There were the state management areas south of him, but they were so overrun with duck hunters that

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the geese didn't have a chance to settle in, much less stay. And most of the grainfields east of the Bay were leased to big-shot hunters from Washington, Baltimore and Philly.

But there was a halfway world between the water of the Bay and the solid ground of the fields, a land of tidewater swamps, little creeks and tall grasses. Surely it would hold geese when the weather was bad. It always had.

That's what hurt. The weather wasn't bad. It was beautiful. Less than six inches of chop and the sun was alone in a cloudless sky. A man ought to have more sense than to put stock in what a weather forecaster had to say, specially here in the Bay.

By 10:30, he knew where the local geese were. They were rafted up, about fifty thousand strong, on the Bay itself. There was about as much chance of getting within range today as there was that one of the geese would be struck by lightning and drop right into his skiff.

Another forty or fifty thousand were spread out along the farmlands of Dorchester County, where you have to pay to hunt. His only chance would be to get back into a cove, hide the boat with marsh grass and wait. He might bag a duck or two, but that would be about it. With the boat hidden, he ate his sandwich and drank hot soup out of the wide-mouth thermos. Then he stretched out in the sun and went to sleep. Despite feeling guilty about laying around when he should have been working, he slept for more than an hour, and awoke to a chill wind which was picking up whitecaps on the Bay. It kept getting colder and stormier. At 2 o'clock he figured that he had better be getting home while he had the chance. The Choptank was kicking up a bit, too. In fact, it was rougher than he wanted to cross, and he had no desire to fight the waves all the way to Tilghmann Island, so he let her fall off to the east, working with the wind, inching along at slow speed so as not to take on any more water than necessary.

The familiar sails of the skipjacks moved ahead of him. Evidently most of the fleet had gone south of their usual bars this morning, even down as far as Deale Island. Now they were paying for being so daring, for they had to beat their way slowly back up to windward. Skipjacks are beautifully adapted to the Bay which gave them birth, suited to its light airs and shallow waters, but they sure do make heavy going out of beating up to windward. Sometimes they have to tack back and forth across the wind for hours, gaining only a few yards upwind on each tack. Most watermen's wives have grown accustomed to waiting up for their men to return to shore.

The clouds in the west were getting blacker and blacker, and Jeb didn't like the looks of them. They rolled and boiled up and over one another. Born on the Bay, Jeb had a lifetime of experience with its



Part of the huge flock of Canada Geese which winters on the Delmarva Peninsula.

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58 capricious weather. He wasn't a bit surprised when it started to rain, nor was he surprised when the rain turned to sleet and then to snow. Swirling winds sent the white stuff flying into his face. "Just a little snow goes a long way like this," he thought, "'cuz most of it is going horizontally, not really falling at all."

Looking ahead at the wide expanse of white water which lay between him and Tilghmann Island's lee, Jeb shook his head. "Too rough for a boat this size."

Realizing that he couldn't go home, he sought the first inlet to the east, running before the wind. He almost missed the familiar inlet because of the heavy snow, but finally he entered the relatively calm water. The wind was out of the northwest, so he headed west to find a lee shore. He almost ran out of water before he ran out of wind, but he finally stopped against a lee bank, waded ashore and tied the painter securely. Then he carried his shotgun and coffee bottle up to a rotting boathouse which sagged against the decaying pilings of an ancient dock.

Out of the wind and snow, Jeb took stock. With the stoicism of a waterman, he knew that he was anchored for as long as the wind held. "When it lets up, I'll head for home," he thought, "whether that happens in an hour or after two weeks." Only a fool would try to cross the Bay now in a boat as small as his skiff. He wondered about the working fleet of skipjacks and figured that Captain Murphy would have taken the *Sigsbee* back into Knapp's Narrows, unless he had gone down toward Deale with the others. That was not likely, because he had seen the *Sigsbee* working in the Choptank, and it would have been a long run south, starting that late.

By 3 o'clock the wind was dropping off somewhat, but the snowfall was getting heavier—falling vertically now, instead of being driven horizontally by the wind. Because the wind was less, he heard the sound of geese!

The half-heard muttering of the flock came from the cove he was in. He picked up his shotgun, slid a couple of high-base 4's in and started walking down the path to the south. Stepping over the broken remains of a rotten boat, he felt his foot break through the frozen crust and slip into the soft mud below. The sounds grew louder and he walked softly, eyes searching the swirling snow for sight of the birds.

The wind was dying completely now, and he knew that he had only a short time to find the birds before they went flying forth to their usual afternoon feeding. Then he heard them again—but the sound came from behind him! He had overrun their hiding spot. Bending over as far as he could, he hurried back along the shore. There was a

sodbank ahead, at just exactly the right angle to stop the wind. But where along its length would they be most likely to have sheltered? He could see only the six-inch thick layer of new snow which covered the marsh grass, bending it nearly flat with its wet weight.

He stopped to catch his breath, calling on the memories of years spent hunting and fishing this area, trying to remember what the sodbank looked like from the other side. Slowly the picture formed in his mind, and he moved to his right, stalking with the sure knowledge that the geese would be close up against the bank at its highest point—the point where one tree grew out of the mud, the only point dry enough to give footing to a tree.

He reached the tree and got down on his hands and knees to crawl around it. He heard the geese. There they were! Sliding the safety off, he stood erect as the geese erupted in a thunder of wings, heavy bodies hurtling into flight with remarkable speed. He picked a big bird on his left and shot, watched to make sure that the bird fell, then swung on a second goose and carefully dropped that one. He tried to reload quickly, in case a late riser might give him a third shot, but his cold-numbed fingers dropped the shells and he gave it up. The flying birds quickly disappeared behind the snowflakes. One fallen goose waved a foot feebly as it floated belly up, the other was motionless. He waded out and picked them up, then hurried back to his boat.

If the geese sought shelter behind the sodbanks, out of the wind, where would be the next likely place? He knew of one more, about a mile away, but it would be a race to get there before the birds left. He started the motor, deciding to make a run for it and perhaps bag his third bird, the legal limit.

A quarter of a mile from the sodbank, he shut off the motor and let the boat glide toward shore. When it grounded, he waded, pulling the boat behind him. Beaching the boat, he went down the bank at a half run, panting from the exertion of running in hip boots.

Behind the high point of the sodbank, he paused to catch his breath. He could hear nothing and it seemed silly to sneak up on a place which was probably empty. "No sense in thinking I can think like a goose," he thought. But he continued to sneak up on the sodbank, shotgun at the ready.

He was only about ten yards away from the snow-covered drop when the geese went up—six big honkers standing on their tails as they scaled up for safety. He had plenty of time and picked a big goose, dropping it into the water. Watching the rest of the birds fly away, he became aware that the goose was trying to escape. It had righted itself and was swimming strongly. Holding high, so as not to load more shot into the carcass, Jeb fired and the goose collapsed.

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60 By the time he had retrieved his third goose, the snow had stopped completely. The sun was breaking through the dark clouds to the west, and he had about an hour of daylight left. That might be enough to get him home; he had no desire to spend the night on the cold, wet and miserable bank of the Choptank.

The three geese made a lovely pile in the front of the skiff as he rounded the point and headed into the Choptank itself. The skiff would get him home, if he didn't try to rush it. He settled down to slow slogging, fighting his way across the seas, which ran almost straight east now.

Hunkered down into his foul-weather gear, he didn't see the skipjack until she was almost upon him. Riding the wind across the mouth of the Choptank, Captain Bill was taking the easy way home, running with the wind to the lee of Tilghmann's Island. There he would drop his sails and use the push boat to motor on up to the east end of the Narrows. It was a long way around, but it would be much faster than fighting his way up into the wind to reach the west end of the Narrows.

Raising up as far as he dared, Jeb stared at the skipjack, computing her course and speed with a practiced eye. He could get close enough to be seen if he could just speed up a bit. He revved the motor and the boat surged into the chop, sending spray flying in every direction as her blunt bow smashed into the waves.

At the helm of his ship, Captain Bill was one big grin as he watched his vessel fly along, riding full with the strong wind. He had another reason to grin, for 110 bushels of oysters held the *Sally Jane* low in the water. His CB had told him that others were heading south, so he had gone that way, also. He had had good luck, almost filling before the storm hit. He had run up and across the wind, using only a reefed jib, until he got even with the mouth of the Choptank. Then he had raised the main and gone speeding east. Now the new nylon sails popped over his head like pistol shots—the *Sally Jane* was really making way.

His crew of four oyster pickers were hugging the cast-iron stove belowdecks, drinking coffee and trying to get dry. Captain Bill had no complaint with that. He needed no help when she sailed herself so beautifully, and no one needed a lookout in these familiar waters.

He saw the spray flying off Jeb's skiff when it was half a mile ahead and altered course to come alongside. Tossing a line to the skiff, Captain Bill yelled, "Come aboard, Jeb, and ride home with us!"

Finding it beyond his strength to haul the skiff up to the skipjack, Jeb gave up and got down as low as possible in the middle of his skiff so that she would tow nicely, without yawing and fishtailing around.

Thirty minutes later, just as it grew really dark, the captain swung the *Sally Jane* around and into the wind and let down the sails. While the crew reefed and secured the sails and swung out the push boat, Jeb hauled himself aboard. He brought a goose with him.

"Know anybody that needs a goose for Christmas dinner, Captain?" The goose was accepted with evident pleasure, and Captain Bill said, "That's mighty generous of you, Jeb, and we'll sure enjoy it. Looks like everybody had a good day, today, in spite of the weather."

Sliding a knife blade expertly between the edges of a big oyster, Jeb opened it and slurped the meat off the shell. It tasted good, cold and salty. He reached for another.

"Maybe it's a good thing we didn't have you along, if you're going to eat up the profits," Captain Bill laughed at Jeb. "With the weather being so bad, we're lucky we made wages."

Jeb grinned at the perennial complaint of the waterman—a familiar litany of problems besetting the man who wouldn't change jobs with anyone in the world.

Speaking around the third oyster, he said, "If it hadn't been for the lousy weather, Captain, I'da wasted my time. Weather put me onto these geese."

The Snow Is Turning Blue

I WAS A ten-year-old novice, not yet allowed to carry a gun, when I saw my first Blue Goose. Dad and I had crawled along a dead furrow to get within range of a flock of Snow Geese. The Snows were leapfrogging over each other as they fed across the North Dakota prairie. There must have been at least 10,000 of the white birds—unusual for North Dakota in those years. Snows always formed their huge flocks up on the shores of Hudson Bay and James Bay. Then they went all the way down to the Texas and Louisiana Gulf Coasts in one or two long flights. They seldom stopped until they were well past North Dakota—and sometimes, I suppose, it seemed to hunters that the birds didn't stop at all until they were slanting down on the Lissie Prairie in Texas.

Dad was a confirmed Canada and Whitefront hunter, but he had never shot a Snow Goose. He was almost as excited as I was when the noisy, talkative geese got up and sat down again, always moving, always coming closer to where we lay in ambush.

"Stay down now, Son," Dad whispered when the noise of the geese was all around us and the black-tipped wings seemed about to hit me in the face.

Dad sat up, and 10,000 Snow Geese shrilled in alarm as they vaulted into the air. Dad was a good shot, and in those days he didn't need a three-shot plug in his gun.

When the birds got out of gun range, they had left five of their number behind on the dark stubble. I ran happily to retrieve two of the birds. When I got back, dad was admiring a strange-looking bird. It was the shape and size of a Snow Goose, but it was white only on the head. The rest of the streamlined body was a slate blue-gray.

Dad decided that the strange fowl must be a hybrid, a cross between the Snow and some other, darker goose. "Take a good look, Son," he said. "You may never see another goose like it!"

That bird was the first Blue Goose either one of us had ever seen. In the fifty years since that date, the Blue has become known as a color phase of the Lesser Snow Goose, rather than as a separate species. The Blue tends to loiter along the migration path and to winter farther north than its white brother, causing a lot of changes in American goose hunting.

A thousand or more years ago, a "sport" or mutant blue bird appeared in the stock of Snow Geese, somewhere in the northeast corner of their breeding range. The blue phase proved to be a dominant characteristic, and the proportion of Blues in the Snow Goose race slowly began to rise. Blues and Snows belong to the same species and mate readily, although biologists called them by different species names for fifty years. The slow change from white to blue has progressed from east to west across the birds' breeding range. It is still going on—evolution in action—in the 1970's and 1980's. This mutation, however, involves *only* the Lesser Snow Goose. The larger white bird, the Greater Snow Goose (*Chen hyperborea atlantica*), found along the east coast of America, shows no signs of the blue mutation.

Many years after dad shot his first Blue Goose, I was a game management agent for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, assigned to work with the northbound Blues and Snows in spring migration. I would join the migrating birds near Kansas City and stay with them until they became Canadian residents about two months later. In contrast to their arrowing southbound flight, the Cobheads and Snows made the northward trip by easy stages, following the receding snow and ice, usually just behind the Pintail Ducks.

Early in the spring migration, the flocks consisted of 90 percent blue-phase geese and only 10 percent white phase. The blue bird was destined to be the leader on the way back north to the breeding grounds. The blue birds' earlier arrival at the breeding grounds may explain, in part, the Blues' success at outnumbering the white birds. The breeders that reach the nesting ground first have a better chance of raising their young to flight age before winter closes in on their far northern breeding ground. Over the years, the Blues have had more success with their hatches because of their earlier start.

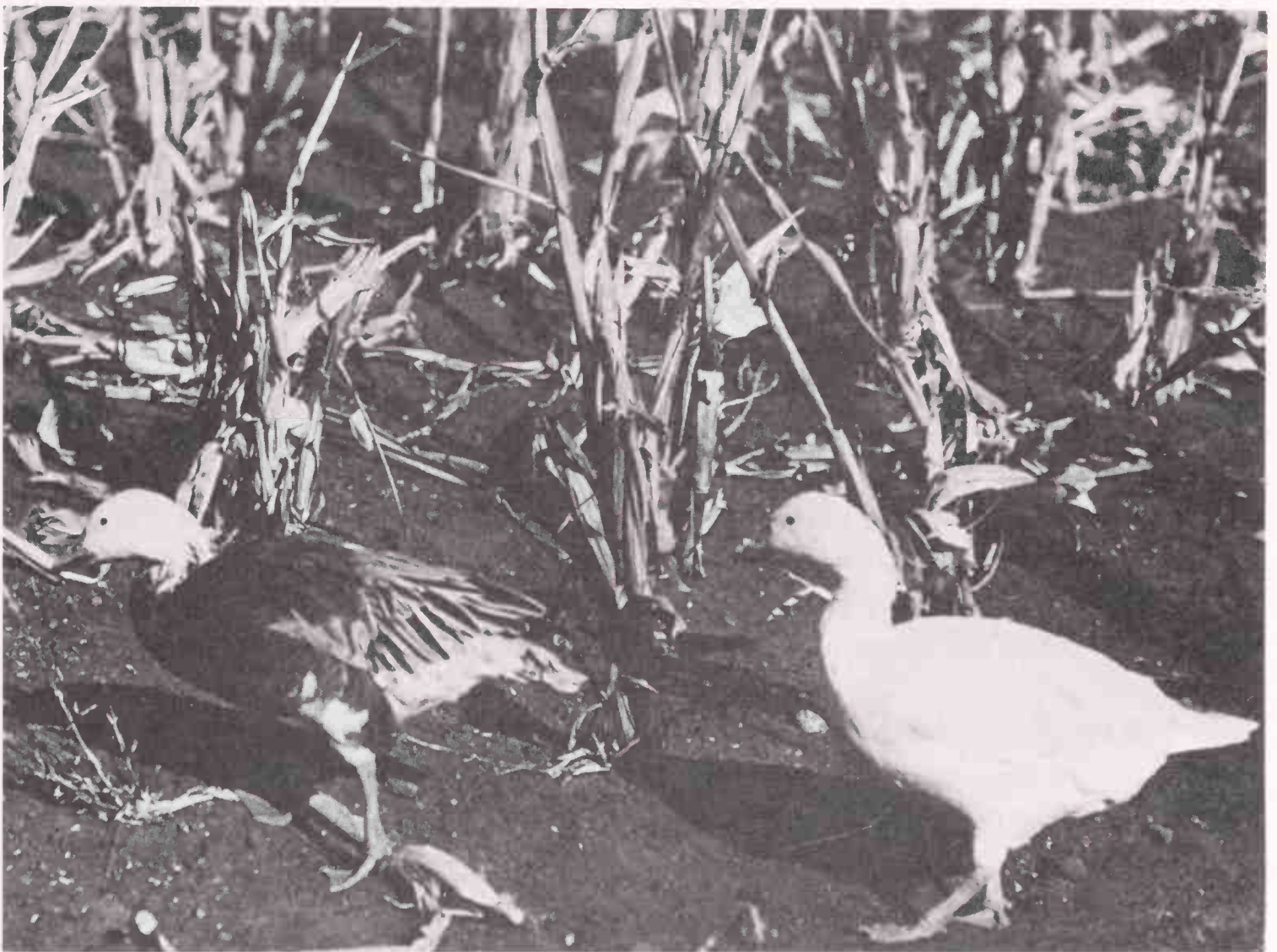
The great flocks that we met in the vicinity of Squaw Creek National Wildlife Refuge in Missouri went northward through a series of familiar stops: Forney Lake in southwestern Iowa; some familiar sandbars along the Missouri River all the way up to Elk Point and Springfield, South Dakota; then overland across the eastern Dakotas.



Snow and Blue Geese are all of one species. The species was once all white, then a mutation—the blue variety with the white head—occurred in the northeastern part of the Lesser Snow Goose's range and has been rapidly becoming the dominant color phase.

As the migration progressed, the proportion of Blues in the flock declined and the Snows took over. The last flocks that lingered into late April north of Devil's Lake, North Dakota, were almost 100 percent white.

Both color phases of the Lesser Snow Goose are very gregarious, and they formed large flocks for this migration. It was an unforgettable sight to see 300,000 geese arrive at a stop within the space of one hour. They usually flew high until they were directly over the next destination. Then the birds would begin a beautiful "falling leaf" maneuver, slipping from side to side as they spiraled down. As they neared the ground, it seemed that they tried to outdo each other in the distance they fell with each sideslip. The last dramatic drop of 100 feet was covered in one swoop, the goose abruptly checking its descent with a sideward glide and a graceful landing. All of the birds talked constantly during the maneuver. The din was terrific.



These are both Lesser Snow Geese, the blue phase on the left and the white phase on the right.

An old-time game warden from Iowa, who had spent forty years watching these birds, gave me an interesting sidelight on the swirling, funneling movement of the descending geese. I asked him how many geese he figured were in one arriving flock. He cocked a thoughtful eye skyward, then judged that there were about 120,000. I asked him how he knew, and he said that there were about 30,000 geese in each "funnel" and that this flock had 4 descending funnels: $4 \times 30 = 120,000$ geese. I didn't believe in counting geese by their "funnels," but when the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service plane landed that afternoon, I asked them how many geese they had estimated at Forney Lake. They told me that they were reporting 120,000 to 130,000.

Heading north, the birds seemed exceedingly restless. Often they would take off in strange, soaring, erratic flights, apparently just for the sheer joy of flying. They were in fine physical condition after spending the winter fattening on the rice prairies of South Texas. I often noted a "trio" flight: one bird taking off in swift racing flight followed by two others. I ascribed this to romance, a female taking off with her two suitors following.

The springtime hunter traditionally took his toll on dawdling north-bound birds, and the tradition persisted long after spring shooting was outlawed. This situation posed quite a problem for state and federal enforcement officers. Spring shooting became socially unacceptable only after a new generation of hunters grew up understanding that the season *really* was closed in the spring. That knowledge soaked in very slowly.

In northwestern Missouri in March of 1956, I watched an elderly gentleman in bib overalls remove a double barrel from a battered pickup and begin sneaking down a levee that would bring him within range of some feeding birds. I drove up just behind him.

"What you got in mind?" I asked.

"I was going to kill a goose for Easter, but I think I changed my mind," he answered with a smile.

"Dad, don't you know that this isn't the time to shoot a goose?" I asked.

"Sonny, the time to shoot a goose is when he's in range," was his answer.

Although great numbers of Blues and Snows have come within range of hunters' guns during the last fifty years, shooting has had almost no effect upon their numbers.

The geese are hunted very heavily in the Louisiana backcountry and along the upper Gulf Coast of Texas. Snow Goose shooting on the Lissie Prairie and in the vicinity of Eagle Lake and Anahuac, Texas, is something better than fabulous, most years. Snows and

Blues aren't too bright, and they decoy readily, coming even to a spread of paper napkins that have been stuck down with a clod of mud. Hunting is excellent on the Texas and Louisiana Coasts, yet the local hunters there complain bitterly about the Snow Goose hunting. The Deep South hunter apparently feels that state and federal refuges are "shortstopping" the normal flight of the geese, causing them to winter farther north. (More on this phenomenon in Chapter Eight.) Louisiana hunters point the finger at Missouri. But in the 1970–1971 season, Louisiana hunters took 270,000 Blues and Snows, while Missouri hunters bagged only 60,000.

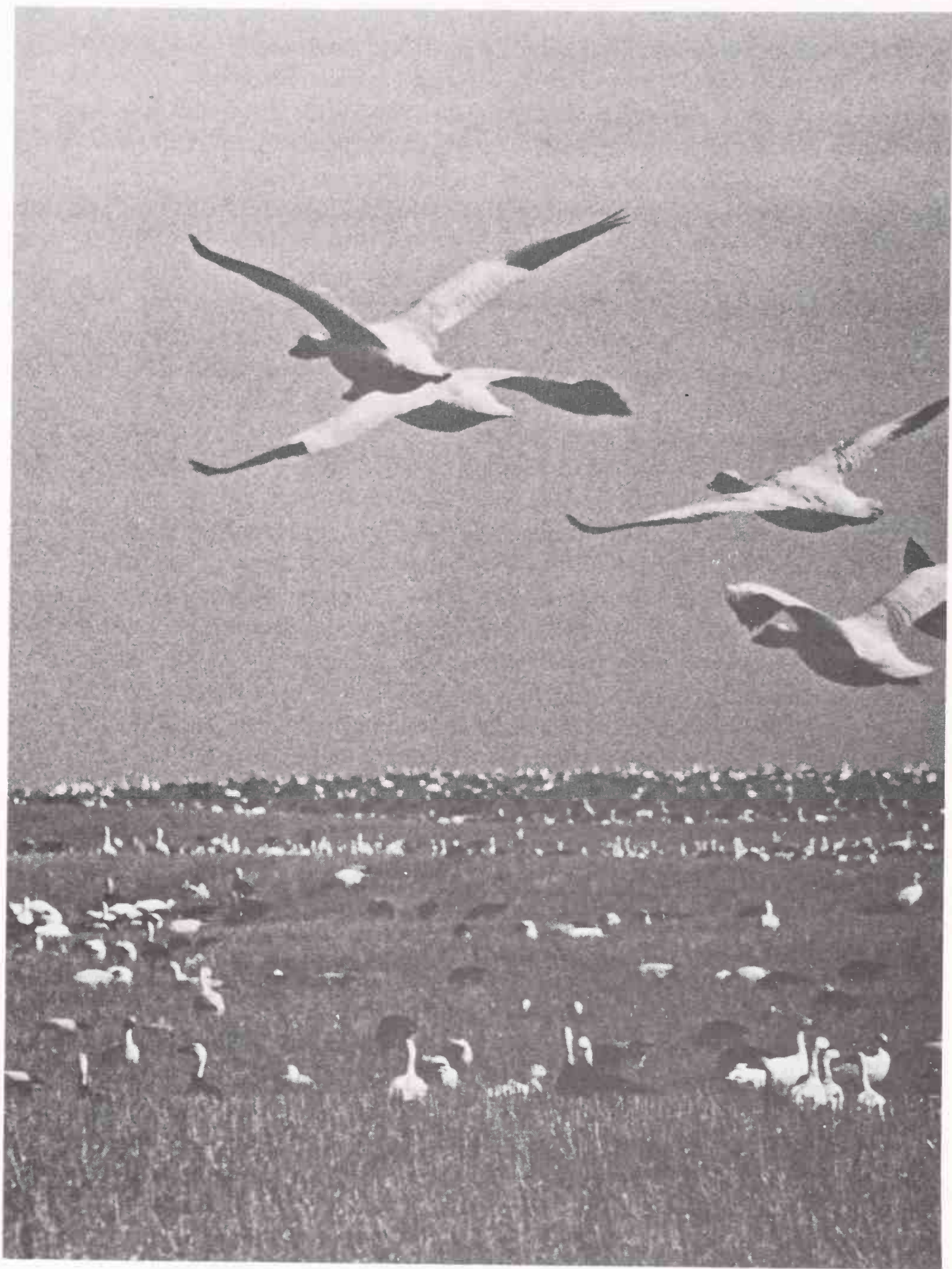
In the 1971–1972 season, the Louisiana Wildlife and Fisheries Commission repeated its charges that the tempting grainfields in the Missouri River Valley are changing the migration patterns of the Blues and Snows. Mike Milonski of the Missouri Department of Conservation says that Missouri shortstopping is a myth. He says that most of the western Missouri birds winter in Texas, not in Louisiana. He adds that Louisiana hunters account for about 70 percent of all the Blues and Snows killed in the entire Mississippi Flyway. Louisiana often doesn't cooperate with federal waterfowl biologists, nor with the other states of the Flyway, so it isn't surprising that Louisiana refused to accept the Missouri claim. Ken Babcock, a waterfowl biologist, went on a three-day flying inspection of the waterfowl areas in Texas and Louisiana in December of 1971. Ken says that there were at least a half million Blues and Snows way down South. Evidently, not all of the birds were being shortstopped before they got to Louisiana.

A Canadian biologist, who refuses to be quoted openly because he doesn't want to be involved in another war between the states, told me that Louisiana's birds are not being shortstopped. He says that Louisiana has shot its birds too heavily, and that another segment of the flock which winters in Missouri is finding its survival more certain. Because it is not getting overshot, the Missouri flock is increasing in numbers.

Regardless of which theory you favor, there is ample evidence that more and more Blue and Snow Geese are spending the winter farther north than did in earlier years. There is also ample proof that large numbers of Blue and Snow Geese do reach the Gulf Coast wintering grounds. Everyone should be happy.

The bird is changing his habits as he changes his color. Even on the Gulf Coast, more birds are now wintering inland, rather than right on the coast as they once did. Human interference accounts for much of this change, as does the increased food supply on the rice prairies inland.

Is the change in wintering areas connected to a change in color?



Snow and Blue Geese in heavy migration-time concentrations land on a North Dakota stubblefield.

Does the dark goose absorb more heat from the sun than the white bird? This may sound like a simple question, but it is being asked more and more often by knowledgeable biologists. Maybe the dark bird doesn't need to go so far south to find a climate he is comfortable in.

Over the next few centuries, the white Lesser Snow Goose seems destined to become a Blue Goose. The first Blue Geese are already being reported on wintering grounds in Southern California. As evolution continues to change the color of the "goose from beyond the north wind," there will be even greater changes in store for the goose hunter in Manitoba, where Cree guides call in the "waveys," and for the goose hunter who sets out paper napkins on the Texas fields.

One thing is certain: The Snow Goose is turning blue!

Goose Migration Paths

ALMOST all geese migrate. Almost—but not all! As we mentioned in Chapter Two, the Nene Goose of Hawaii's lava slopes doesn't migrate, but then who'd leave Hawaii if he didn't have to? This strange bird also doesn't seem to like water very much, so let's just figure that he's a breed apart.

Some local nesting flocks don't seem to migrate at all. The Foothills Flock of Canadas, which you will read about in Chapter Sixteen, don't often leave Colorado, although they travel widely within the state.

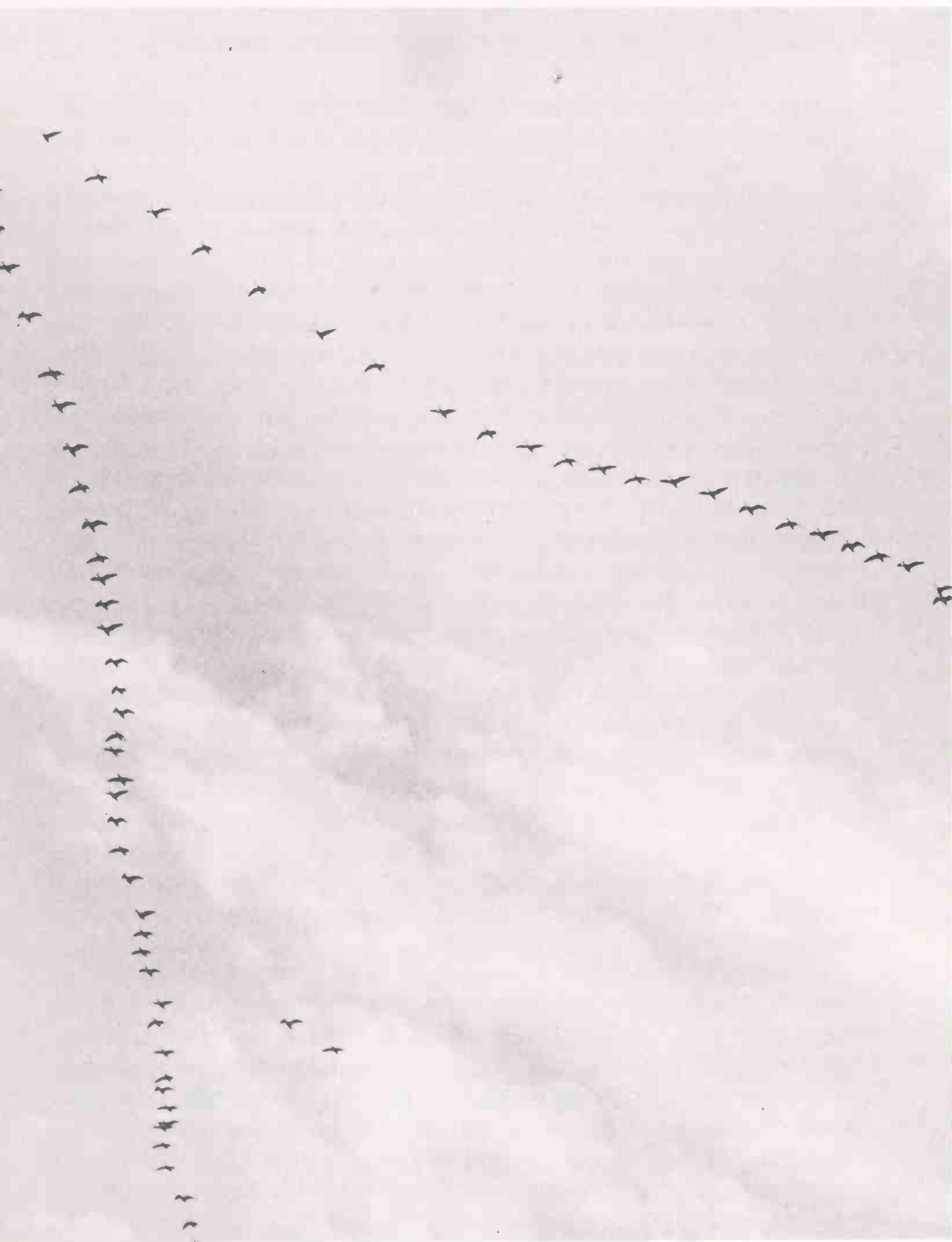
The family of small Canadas which nest in the Aleutian Islands are almost non-migratory, spending both summers and winters in that forbidding climate. However, there are exceptions, and some of the small Aleutian Geese have been seen on the Pacific Coast of the lower forty-eight—sneaking in a bit of winter sunshine.

However, most geese do migrate. If you know where and when and why, you'll be a more successful goose hunter. First of all, *why* do they migrate, and what triggers that migration?

Decades ago, waterfowl biologists and other bird specialists favored one or another of three theories: The Southern Ancestral Home Theory, the Northern Ancestral Home Theory or the Photoperiodism Theory.

Some theorized that the birds had all lived in the tropic regions to start with, but they had moved as far north as they could, in search of more *lebensraum*, or to find more plentiful food supplies. However, they were eventually forced back south by the advancing cold of another ice age. As the ice melted, they went back north as far as they could. Theoretically, this north and south movement became standard operating procedure, coinciding with our seasons.

The Northern Ancestral Home Theory said that the birds' origin was in the north, and that the advance of the glacial age forced them south. But since the memory of their ancestral homes remained in the



Typical migration formation is here exhibited by Snow Geese on northward migration.

instinctual bundles they inherited from preceding generations, they kept on trying to go north until it became an ingrained habit.

Neither of these theories was backed by solid scientific evidence, and few would believe either of them today. But surely migration is more than an ingrained habit. There must be a reason for such a prodigious expenditure of energy.

The Photoperiodism Theory states that the birds realize that cold weather is coming when the hours of daylight start to grow shorter, and they realize that spring is again coming when the days start to get longer. Simple exposure to varying amounts of sunlight triggers the flight—be it southward or northward. Several scientific experiments with migrating songbirds knocked that theory into a cocked hat, however. Even when given exactly the same amount of light every single day, measured to the hundredth of a lumen, the birds still wanted to migrate on the same days as other birds exposed to variations in light. It is also worth remembering that the days are actually longer up north than they are down south—even in the middle of summer. When the migrant bird starts flying south, he is going into an area that has fewer hours of daylight, because the twilight period is shorter the closer you get to the Equator.

The Bluewing Teal refutes this Photoperiodism Theory completely. It starts its migration southward in late July or early August. Seemingly, it goes north only long enough to raise its brood, then it gets sick of the north country. When it migrates, the weather is warm, the days are very long and there is no reason known to man why it should leave. But the Teals head south, and they may fly as far as 4000 miles to winter in Colombia, South America. Some years there have been as many as a million Bluewings on the huge Cienega Grande near Santa Marta, Colombia. They appear before it gets cold enough for any other duck to even think about migrating. Why do they migrate so early?

As long as we are trying to straighten out our perspectives about goose migration, let's accept only known facts. Most of us think that the goose lives up north and is forced to spend some time in the south by bad weather. A more realistic look will tell you that geese spend more time on the wintering areas than they do on the nesting areas. This is especially true of Blues and Snows. Their nesting season is very short, because it's cold in Baffin Island almost all of the time. (Some years the entire summer comes on a Wednesday.) The geese spend about two months there, leaving ten months for migration and for wintering. To a greater or lesser degree, this is true of all migratory geese.

How fast do geese migrate?

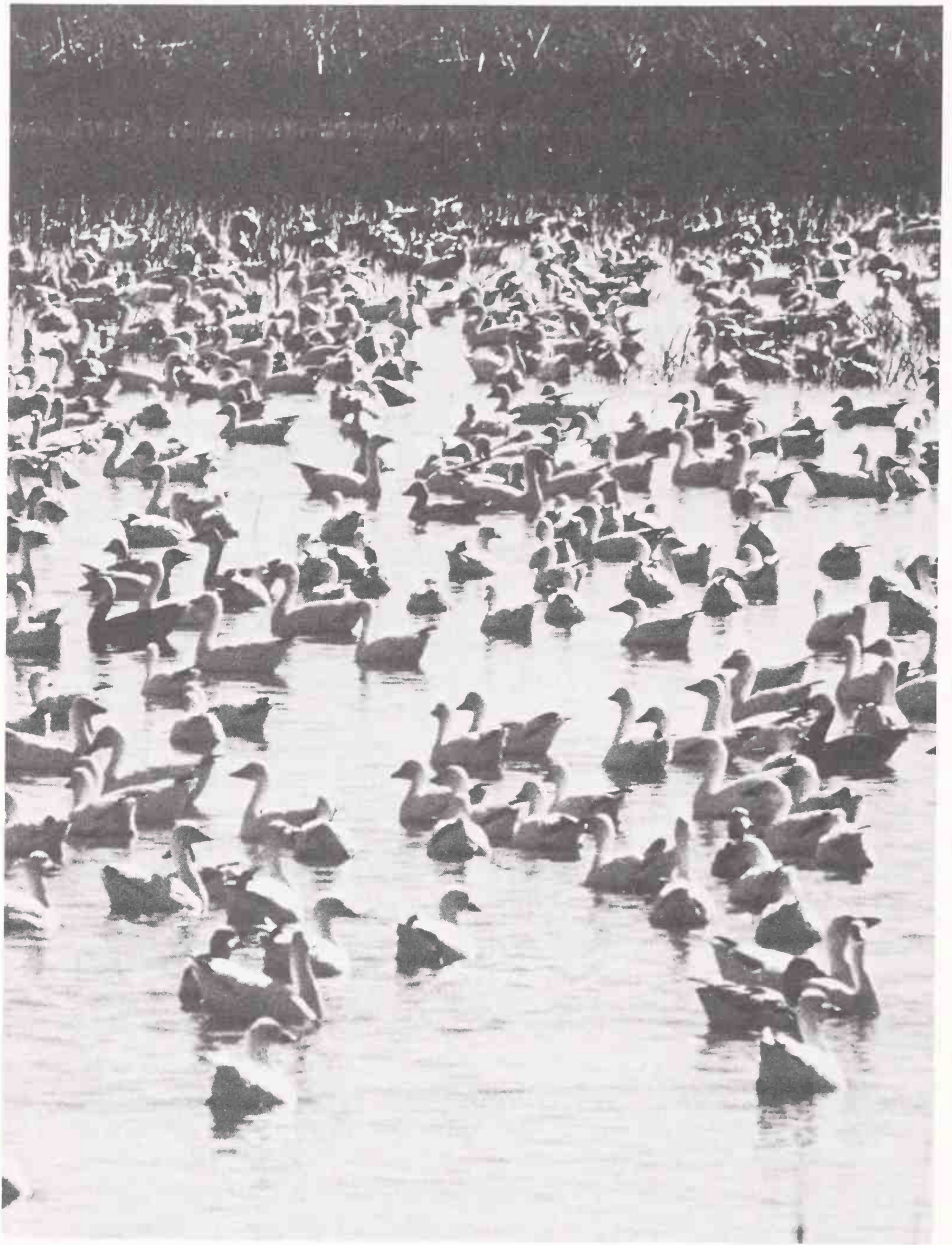
An adult Blue Goose, banded just south of James Bay, was shot on the Lissie Prairie of Texas just three days later. That means that he flew between 400 and 500 miles per day—a nonstop flight speed of 20.83 miles per hour. If we do the arithmetic differently, allowing eight hours per day for resting and feeding, our result is that he still flew at a speed of 31.25 miles per hour for three sixteen-hour days. If he was flying only half of the time, and resting and feeding the other half of the time, he was flying at a speed of 41.6 miles per hour all the time he was airborne. That is moving on down the road—or the Flyway, as the case may be. If you don't believe he flew in a straight line, you add a lot more miles—and miles per hour—to his feat.

However, another goose out of the same flock may not make it to the Texas Gulf Coast wintering grounds for three weeks. He may dawdle along the way, stopping in to visit his northbound way-stations at Sand Lake in South Dakota, Forney Lake in Iowa and Squaw Creek in Missouri—and points between. Free spirits, geese set their own timetable when heading south.

But in the spring, when the gander begins thinking about what the goose was thinking about all winter—then the lovebirds head for the breeding grounds as fast as their wings will take them, no? Not necessarily. In fact, there's no data I know of to prove that the urge to reproduce has anything to do with migration. It simply occurs at the same time.

Canada Geese mate before they head north—or on the way north—and they mate for life. When one of the pair is killed, the other one quickly seeks out a new mate and usually is able to head north with a new partner without too much trouble. Canadas almost always move northward in time with the 35-degree Isotherm. As the daytime temperature climbs up to 35 degrees in an area, you can expect the migrating geese to arrive. Obviously, they must often backtrack—even as the thaw line backtracks. Obviously, too, they get caught in a blizzard quite often, but they ride it out with very few problems.

This orderly Canada Goose flight contrasts sharply with that of the Blues and Snows. These geese sometimes wait in their favored southern habitat until it becomes plumb hot on the Gulf Coast. They hold back, as if they know it is going to be miserable up on the Arctic Islands and they are in no hurry to start. Then, in one great leap, they'll all be gone, making it from the Gulf of Mexico to Canada nonstop. At least this is a usual procedure—it isn't true of all of the flocks of Snows and Blues. Some years great concentrations of the white geese (which include the blue morph, or blue phase of the Snow) move by slow stages up the flyways from Texas, through Ok-



The Bosque del Apache National Wildlife Reservation is almost the southern terminus of the Central Flyway for the Lesser Snow Goose, both white and blue phases. Blue-phase birds have a tendency to winter farther north. These are mainly snow-white flocks.

lahoma, spend two weeks socializing in the Squaw Creek NWR, then dawdle along to Forney Lake, Iowa, then to eastern South Dakota, where their shining white contrasts with the black of new-plowed ground. Then they move along at a lope to Lac Aux Morts in North Dakota and finally cross into Canada at the end of April. Perhaps they know that it is still cold winter in Baffinland on the first of May?

As a Sioux City, Iowa, based Game Management Agent, I spent a lot of time with these geese on their northward flight, motivated by a certain knowledge that assorted gentry along the Flyway were not yet reconciled to the fact that legal goose shooting took place only in the fall. In 1955, the white geese spent a lot of time near Forney Lake—which isn't a lake at all, but just a big cornfield where once an oxbow lake had formed off the Missouri River. Their numbers swelled each day as laggards arrived from the south until there were about 150,000 birds in the one county. One morning about 10 o'clock the entire flock got airborne simultaneously and headed upriver. "Good," I thought. "They're finally on their way."

Migrating geese set a pretty steady pace of 40–50 miles per hour over the ground. The roads were in good shape, so I was able to keep them in sight as they went. Nearing Omaha, Nebraska, the great flock was thrown into utter confusion by jet fighters which came screaming across in front of them, flying from Offut Air Force Base. The geese wheeled and turned and headed back south. As I watched in amazement, they went all the way back to Forney Lake, an airline distance of about forty miles.

The next morning they tried again, and again were driven back south by jet aircraft.

The third morning, I parked halfway between Forney Lake and Omaha and used my binoculars. About 11:30 I saw the huge flock coming—my familiar 150,000 Blues and Snows, a carpet of gray and white, moving steadily upriver.

As the geese got near, jet traffic came out of Offut, as it always did, for this was a busy base. The geese wheeled and turned—and I groaned. Frankly, I wanted them to get going so that I could go home and see whether or not I still had a wife and kids. But this time they wheeled only two miles back towards Forney. Then their ancestral compass took over again and they came back north with determination. The part of the flock closest to the next jet swung involuntarily away from its path, but the migration instinct was not to be denied again. They continued on their way, just as millions of geese have done in years past. They dropped in to land on an old oxbow near Onawa, Iowa, rested and talked it over for an hour, then headed resolutely north again.

76 By telephone I checked with Dutch, the big game warden at Sidney, Iowa, and was told that there wasn't a single Blue or Snow Goose left down there. The next day, I sought them to the north, in South Dakota. They were gone! They were already in Canada.

When do geese fly? Whenever they feel like it. They usually start a migration in the daylight, but not always. They often continue their flight through the night, and we are all familiar with the haunting, querulous call of migrating Canadas passing overhead in the dark. That's one of the surest signs of approaching spring. Geese have been reported by pilots flying at 20,000 feet, but 99 percent of their flight is accomplished much lower, down around 3000.

As a youngster, I thought that geese probably flew at night because they needed to find food in the daytime. After all, it takes a lot of calories to fuel their flight engine during migration. Then I found out that it takes a goose only about half an hour to fill his stomach on most Dakota fields, so I started to wonder about my theory. When I learned that geese often feed at night, especially on bright moonlit nights—I came back to my first instinct: Geese fly when they feel like it.

What guides the geese over trackless distances, without navigation beacons or instruments that we can recognize? Many theories have been worked out: that they have a built-in compass which is guided by the earth's magnetic field, that some kind of vibration, similar to radio, guides them on their continent-spanning trips. There is hard evidence that radio signals do seem to confuse migrating birds—but only those close to the transmitter. What guides them, other than the ancestral memory, inherited with their genes and chromosomes? I don't know, but I do know that they fly when they want to, and they fly *where* they want to.

Let's take a look at where some geese *want* to fly.

A Whitefronted Goose hatched on the Alaskan Coast of the Bering Sea follows its parents on a flight from Alaska across eastern Alberta, into the United States in the northwest corner of North Dakota, then across eastern Colorado, across the driest part of West Texas and on into Mexico, perhaps wintering as far south as Chiapas! Four thousand miles, one way. That's a remarkable flight. Certainly, not all Whitefronts travel that far; most of them winter in the lower forty-eight states.

Other Whitefronts hatched in Greenland swing across the North Atlantic and winter in Ireland. Some of these birds have also been known to harbor a pro-American bias and have wintered along the Atlantic Coast of the U.S.—but very rarely.

Generally speaking, most goose migration paths swerve to the east-

ward as they enter the United States. But there's an exception to every rule. The Ross's Goose swings to the westward and winters its entire population in the Central Valley of California. It is the only Arctic-breeding goose that fails to turn to the east.

Pioneers thought that the geese they hunted came from directly north of them, and were headed directly south of them. Now we know that is not true. Trying to unravel the spaghetti-like patterns which show which goose migrates along which migration path is a never-ending job—and probably the paths change over the years. Even those who spend their working lives studying geese are not willing to bet on their beliefs, for geese have a way of making liars out of honest men.

To see just how complicated goose migration paths are, let's follow the flight paths of only one species—the Canada Goose—along only one Flyway, the Central. The Canada's flight paths are like this:

1. The Tall Grass Prairie population of small Canadas nest in the eastern Arctic, migrating through Manitoba, the eastern Dakotas and on into Oklahoma and eastern Texas to winter on the Gulf Coast.

2. The Short Grass Prairie Flock is another group of small Canadas which nests in the central and western Arctic, then migrates south through Alberta and Saskatchewan, across Wyoming into south-east Colorado and spreads out across a wide area stretching from northern New Mexico to the Nebraska Panhandle for the winter.

3. Most of the Eastern Prairie population of Canada Geese nests along the southwestern and western side of Hudson Bay, but migrates eastward along the edge of the Central Flyway, to winter at Swan Lake National Wildlife Refuge in Missouri.

4. The Western Prairie population of larger Canada Geese nest in the endless prairie pothole country of western Manitoba and Saskatchewan. They migrate south and slightly east through the two Dakotas, and some of them winter at Fort Randall Reservoir on the southern edge of South Dakota. The rest of the population spreads out to winter at widely scattered places in Kansas, Oklahoma, Texas and Missouri.

5. The Hi-Line population of Canadas nests in Montana and the prairies of Saskatchewan and Alberta. Most of these birds take a relatively short migration flight, wintering in Wyoming and Colorado. Twenty years ago, this Hi-Line Flock sent many of its birds down to New Mexico to winter in the Rio Grande Valley. Today all of the flock has been converted to wintering in Colorado, seeing no reason to go on south for the sunshine (See Chapter Sixteen.) To prove the rule

78 that every rule has an exception to offer, an occasional Canada of the Hi-Line Flock still makes the longer flight down to Old Mexico for a winter vacation, but that is extremely rare. It is so rare, in fact, that when a big Canada Goose was bagged by a hunter at Chihuahua's famed Rancho La Estancia, the owner Manuel Enriquez had the bird mounted and hung over the fireplace with a commemorative plaque to explain its rarity.

6. The five groups described above are fairly well documented in their travels by band returns. But there remains still another group, the largest Canadas using the Central Flyway. Their distribution in nesting, migration and wintering covers all of the Great Plains area, including Alberta and Saskatchewan, the two Dakotas and Nebraska, parts of Wyoming and Colorado. The migrations of family groups within this huge area have not been mapped as yet. These are the big fellows I occasionally get a crack at—may they increase and multiply!

Looking back to my earliest goose hunting in central North Dakota, I figure that four populations—the Western Prairie Flock, the Eastern Prairie Flock, the Tall Grass Prairie Flock and the Short Grass Prairie Flock, all went through North Dakota. The first three of these flocks migrated over my home town of Jamestown, and the Short Grass Flock went through the western edge of North Dakota.

Yet our portion of North Dakota, the part around Jamestown, was not and is not known as a good goose hunting area. The reason is, of course, that Canada Geese are not evenly distributed all through their migration route. In fact, they do not provide good hunting at all evenly, but only at the concentration points along the migration path. Four of these flocks migrated through North Dakota, but only one—the Tall Grass Prairie Flock—was available at concentration points in North Dakota. The others—to oversimplify—flew over, but didn't stay around and get shot very much. The Tall Grass birds concentrated at places like Lac Aux Morts, Devil's Lake, the Turtle Mountains—all of them well to the east of my hunting ground. We simply weren't in good goose hunting territory for Canadas, and you have to be in good hunting territory if you want to succeed as a goose hunter.

It all boils down to this: You have to be where the wild goose flies if you want to bag your share of geese. And the wild goose flies wherever he wants to fly. It's up to you to learn his habits.

Shortstopping

WHEN MAN changes the environment for geese at some spot along their historic migration path, and that change causes geese to stop and spend the winter at a spot short of their ancestral migration terminus—that's called shortstopping. That is, it is called shortstopping by the hunter who has less opportunity to hunt as a result of the change in the goose's environment.

If the goose hunter is one of those fortunate ones who live in the area where the environmental change was made—and that goose hunter gets better hunting as a result—he will not call this change shortstopping. He may call it habitat improvement, or establishing a flock of domestic breeding geese, or improving the food supply for migrants, or providing water areas where they hadn't existed before. But he won't call it any bad names. It all depends upon whose ox is being gored.

Some shortstopping is incidental to accomplishing another purpose, but most is aimed at causing the migrating flock to linger a while, rather than migrating on—out of reach of our shotguns.

An example of incidental shortstopping is the construction of great reservoirs on the main stem of the Missouri River. Geese find these huge water areas very attractive for migration resting spots. They fly out to the Dakota and Nebraska grainfields to feed and find no reason to move on south. They've found their goal: a place to freeload lunch all winter, with open water for a base of operations. For most goose species, falling temperatures are not the factor which triggers their continued southward flight. Most geese seem completely immune to cold—and after you've plucked a couple of geese, you'll know why. With their feathers fluffed out to hold dead air between them as insulation, and with that wonderful undercoat of goose down, they don't care whether it is twenty below or twenty above. But they must have a little bit of open water available—or they'll head on south.

Sometimes a refuge may harbor only a small segment of the mi-

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80 grating flock, and only for a short time on their southward flight. Man may make some change—such as planting food crops that will be available in fall and winter, or increasing the water area, or simply providing greater protection for more birds by increasing the size of the refuge. Presto, the geese find the three essentials—food, water and sanctuary—and they fly no farther. If your hunting area is south of that refuge, you, my friend, have been shortstopped!

One of the most eloquent voices raised to protest the shortstopping of Canada Geese is that of my good friend Hurley Campbell, a well-known writer from the southernmost state in the Mississippi Flyway, Louisiana. Hurley is no newcomer to waterfowl management: He has held the position of Deputy Secretary of the Louisiana Wildlife and Fisheries Commission for many years. In a magazine article published in November of 1976, Hurley had this to say:

Management of waterfowl refuges to hold birds and keep them from traditional migration patterns began when Horseshoe Lake Refuge was created in Illinois.

In just a few years, more than half of the Mississippi Valley population of Canadas were wintering at Horseshoe. Hunting clubs around the edges of the refuge killed astronomical numbers of birds. By the mid-1940's, the first five days of hunting saw more than 5000 birds taken. The kill was so excessive federal authorities closed the season, for fear that the flocks would be decimated.

This is one of the more disgusting results of shortstopping, the harvest of manipulated birds. In later years when shortstopping had spread over several other states, a harvest quota was imposed in order to insure reasonable kills.

After the initial problems became apparent at Horseshoe, the Fish and Wildlife Service made a wise decision. The flocks would have to be dispersed! However, they evidently gave no thought whatsoever to banning management practices which held geese in the first place.

They, instead, moved fifty miles north of Cairo where they planted grain and pasturage for geese at Crab Orchard National Wildlife Refuge. In five years the flocks of Canadas here had grown from 5000 to 50,000 birds, and the action, "shortstopping the short-stoppers," had begun.

Having learned nothing from the mistake of stopping geese at Horseshoe and Crab Orchard, the federal agency moved into Wisconsin and created Horicon Wildlife Refuge, where 21,000 acres were planted to foods designed to stop and hold geese. It took only three years before more than 100,000 birds were using Horicon as the end of their flyway.

Later on in the same article, Hurley Campbell wrote:

States to the south raised a storm of protest. Louisiana was especially angered as its flocks of wintering Canadas dropped to almost zero. . . . "In

1962, in a desperate attempt to save the nucleus of our wintering flock of Canadas, we completely closed the hunting season on the big geese,” stated Hugh Bateman, waterfowl specialist with the Louisiana Wildlife and Fisheries Commission. “In spite of this, we saw the numbers of Canadas drop from 12,500 to less than 1000 in 1975. This drop came with no gun pressure being exerted on these birds, so we know that the geese just stayed up north.”

The first call for a rethinking of this goose management policy came from Ray Buller, Central Flyway Representative with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and one of the soundest thinkers on waterfowl management. In a speech before the First Annual International Waterfowl Symposium in St. Louis in 1975, Ray said, “Neither the states nor the Fish and Wildlife Service has the moral right to foster this technique of managed habitat north of the traditional wintering grounds.”

Faced with suddenly increasing populations of Canadas wintering “up nawth,” the Fish and Wildlife people tried some short-term remedies. They ordered refuge managers to cut down on the amount of cropland food available to the birds on the migration path. They thought that the birds would exhaust the supply of food on the refuge and then move on south to the next free lunch. It didn’t work. The birds ate every bit of grain on the refuge and then moved out to farmers’ crops on neighboring lands. Depredation of crops caused losses of millions of dollars. Even when the neighboring farmers’ food supply was all eaten, the birds simply flew out farther and farther to feed—feeding as much as fifty miles away from the refuge and returning to its safety to roost.

Neighboring farmers screamed for help. However, many of these farmers were reaping another harvest—a harvest of cash from goose hunters who paid to hunt on their lands. Many of these farmers didn’t want to see the geese leave the country and migrate on south. They wanted the Fish and Wildlife Service to plant even more acres to crops, so that there would be enough food to satisfy the hundreds of thousands of birds all winter long. The Service took a look at that suggestion, but, figuring that the numbers of geese would probably grow to fit the available food, they didn’t try it.

They tried reducing the area of sanctuary, allowing goose hunting on portions of some of the refuges, to move the birds off. That failed completely and aroused a lot of hard feelings among the neighbors to the refuges.

Then the Service announced that they would disperse the birds and herd them south. They made a valiant attempt. Planes and helicopters

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82 from the Service joined with state airplanes and contract aircraft to “chowse” the birds southward. The huge operation was planned to the “nth” degree and carried out with military precision. The only trouble was—the geese won! A Canada Goose can be the stubbornest of living things, and these hundreds of thousands of geese knew a good thing when they saw it. Horicon, Horseshoe, Crab Orchard and Union County were good things. Expert pilots skillfully flew their planes at low levels, risking their necks constantly, but the geese would play the game only so far. Then they resolutely turned and flew back under the aircraft, right into the teeth of the rockets and cherry bombs which were being exploded to turn them southward, and lit on their beloved refuges, ignoring the carbide exploders that thundered in the same fields. Pilots who spent three or four days dodging geese all felt that the good Lord had been with them. Nobody took a twelve-pound gander in the propeller, an accident which would have meant death for the low-flying pilot. Reluctantly, the Service decided that hazing the geese to continue their migration didn’t work.

It would seem logical to suggest that if improving conditions caused the geese to stop farther north, deteriorating conditions might cause them to go on south, where conditions were now better. But closer thought reveals the flaw in that logic: Because the birds no longer go south, they no longer have a chance to see that it is better down south. You have to let them see the better wintering ground, before they will shift to it. Since less than a thousand Canadas a year were making the flight down to Louisiana, deteriorating conditions in Wisconsin and Illinois wouldn’t help the situation.

Louisiana tried another logical step. They started a native breeding flock of Canadas, in the hope that they would either decide that migration was unnecessary, or would migrate to the areas where they were raised—in Louisiana. That attempt failed to make any impression. As a result of shortstopping, Louisiana closed the season on taking Canada Geese in 1962—and today, they still have no Canada Goose hunting.

So far, it all looks like cause and effect. The FWS did a bad thing up north and the birds stayed there to cause problems, instead of heading on down their ancestral migration paths. But other developments cloud the issue.

For example, the shortstopping in the Mississippi Flyway occurred at the same time that the Canada Geese flocks were increasing greatly in size—not only where they had good conditions in the Mississippi Flyway states of Wisconsin and Illinois, but in widely separated places such as the Eastern Shore of Maryland and the rest of the beautiful Delmarva Peninsula. Geese in the Atlantic Flyway have increased and

multiplied at roughly the same rate as the Mississippi Flyway honkers. Yet there were no “shortstopping machinations” going on on the Eastern Shore. True, there are important National Wildlife Refuges—Bombay Hook, Blackwater, Brigantine—but the big increase in Canada Geese is *not* centered on the refuges! The increase is uniform across the entire wintering area, with the bulk of the geese living on private land!

Could it be that the landowners of the Eastern Shore, having learned that overshooting kills the goose which lays the golden egg, have changed their hunting patterns to follow the lead of progressive places like Remington Farms? As we describe in Chapter Nineteen, by voluntarily reducing the number of days hunted, Remington Farms has ensured quality goose hunting rather than quantity goose hunting. Food and water are available in plenty; by adding sanctuary, the managers have guaranteed themselves a wonderful wintering flock, which now approaches 600,000 birds per winter.

Did this great increase in wintering Canadas on the Delmarva Peninsula signal a decline in wintering Canadas farther down the Flyway? Yes, sorrowfully, it did. There are fewer wintering Canadas in North Carolina’s Currituck Sound, and the melodious honk is heard less often in Mattamuskeet than it once was. But the decline in the goose-hunting opportunities at the south end of the Atlantic Flyway has other causes—and they are related to shortstopping of a different kind, in a different flyway.

The Eastern Shore honkers nest and raise their young, for the most part, in the great chunk of northern Canada stretching from the Ungava Peninsula all the way over to eastern Ontario. These birds migrate southward along the Coast.

But there used to be a goodly flock of Canadas which came from farther west. They migrated down through the Mississippi Flyway all the way into Alabama, then cut across to winter near St. Mark’s National Wildlife Refuge in Florida. When the Fish and Wildlife Service built Wheeler National Wildlife Refuge in Alabama, the flock found all it needed right there. No need to migrate on down to St. Mark’s. This change was coupled with the tremendous invasion of Florida’s coastal areas by human developments—condominiums, marinas and vacation resorts. The Gulf Coast couldn’t compete with Wheeler, and the birds were effectively shortstopped farther north.

Shortstopping was once thought to be a province of the Canada Goose manager, and we believed that other species of geese were not affected by it as much. We may have to change our minds on this.

Texas and Louisiana are now noticing that greater numbers of Blues and Snows are wintering in Missouri, due to the availability of

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84 winter food up there. When Texas screamed long and loud, the Fish and Wildlife Service responded with changed directives to the managers of Sand Lake Refuge in South Dakota and Swan Lake and Squaw Creek in Missouri. Different crop plantings in those refuges were designed to minimize the lure to wintering Snow Geese. Whether the change was in time or not remains to be seen. However, this tendency of Blues and Snows (one species, remember) to stop farther north for the winter may not be caused by green foods being on the menu at the Missouri refuges. In Chapter Six, we discussed the tendency of the blue-phase bird to winter farther north than the white-phase bird. As the Snow-Blue flock turns more and more to the dark phase, we may have fewer and fewer birds making the long flight to Louisiana and Mexico.

Is shortstopping a calamity which has caused irreversible damage by not being caught in time? Can we find a scapegoat and blame somebody? I'm not ready to blame anyone, nor am I ready to say that shortstopping was all bad. I find it hard to fault a refuge manager who makes his refuge more attractive to geese—after all, that used to be his main concern. I find it hard to say, "You guys are making a mess of Canada Goose management," when I can look out and see tremendous increases in the continental population of honkers. After all, somebody is doing something right.

Those who are hurt by shortstopping—most of us at the southern end of the flyways—worry about huge concentrations of waterfowl of any kind, because we fear that disease may strike those huge concentrations with catastrophic results. Detractors of the Fish and Wildlife Service refuge system say that duck viral enteritis, botulism and lead poisoning are the natural results of these new concentrations. But that argument simply doesn't stand up—not when applied to geese.

A huge concentration of Mallards at Lake Andes National Wildlife Refuge in South Dakota once resulted in a die-off of approximately 15,000 birds due to duck viral enteritis. But that is an isolated case and certainly doesn't show a pattern. Even more certainly, it doesn't indicate a danger to geese.

The alarmists' case for botulism being caused by huge concentrations of waterfowl also fails to stand scrutiny. Newly crowded areas have less reason to be suspect than historically crowded areas. When half a million geese can winter on the Texas Gulf Coast without botulism threats, we have less fear of botulism when half a million geese winter in Illinois and Wisconsin, or half a million geese spread out over the Delmarva Peninsula on the Atlantic Coast. It should be noted, however, that dropping water levels to make Horicon or Horseshoe less attractive to geese may be expected to increase the

incidence of botulism, because the dangers of the disease are diluted by greater quantities of water.

Lead poisoning? Well, it's clear that you have to have a concentration of lead shot to have lead poisoning. The shift from ancestral to new wintering grounds means a shift to new hunting areas, and less chance of lead poisoning, rather than more.

I cannot find it in my heart to condemn the shortstopper. I feel a loss when my New Mexico-wintering Canadas stop in Colorado, instead of coming down here where I can get a crack at them—and I sympathize with the Louisiana hunter who has lost his Canadas. But the continental population is going great guns—so somebody must be doing something right.

Different Hunting Methods

NOT EVERYONE hunts geese the same way. Unusual circumstances call for unusual methods of hunting these greatest of American game birds. One of the most interesting is found in the wide, shallow reaches at the northern end of Chesapeake Bay.

BODY-BOOTING

They call it “body-booting.” At first glance, it looks like a way to commit suicide by drowning or freezing—whichever comes first. Each hunter is attired in a “body-boot,” a one-piece suit of heavy rubber which comes up to the armpits or, as one of my friends told me, “higher if you can get it there.” Inside the shoulder-high body-boot, the hunter wears as many pairs of thermal underwear and wool pants as he can get in—more if it’s a cold day. He is going to be standing chest-deep in the Chesapeake Bay for the next five hours—if he lives that long!

A body-booting setup requires considerable expense and considerable time to erect. But when conditions are right, it pays off in good goose hunting. First you need about forty-two decoys. They come in threes, and you don’t want thirteen sets for obvious reasons. So you have either thirty-six or forty-two. These decoys are heavy wooden silhouettes, sawn from ½- or ¾-inch plywood and carefully painted with non-reflecting paint. Each decoy is woodscrewed and glued to the outer end of a 4-foot two-by-four. The other end of the two-by-four fits into a hinged contraption which allows three decoys to be in one “tie,” folded flat for storage and transportation, yet capable of being unfolded to set the decoys at 90-degree angles to one another. A heavy anchor is attached to the hinge end by a stout nylon rope.



A lefty takes aim from the shelter of an old sunken barrel blind.

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88 One more piece of equipment is needed for each hunter—a stand. The stand is a slightly oversize silhouette decoy, bolted to the top end of a 6- or 8-foot stake. The back side of this decoy has a shelf for your gun and shells—for you'd get mighty tired holding the gun up out of the water for hours on end.

When hunted hard on the Eastern Shore, Chesapeake Bay Canada Geese develop a routine of rafting up out on the open water where they are relatively safe from hunters, and going in to feed on the lush cornfields of the farm country. This is where the body-booter gets into the act.

Using a boat with a cabin big enough to hold a coal-burning stove—to thaw out body-booters—the hunters use long rods to find bottom solid enough to allow them to stand on it without sinking. The water must be shallow enough to allow the hunter to stand erect with his head and shoulders out. Because there is usually a breeze blowing across the Susquehanna Flats, it is nice if the body-booter can stand with half of his body up out of the water. That depth allows him to bend down behind his silhouette when birds are in sight, yet stand with his face well above the chilling spray when there is nothing to do but stand and wait.

The big boat is used to find the bottom site, pick the area for the hunters to stand in and toss out the decoys. Decoys are usually rigged in sets of three, and placed in such a way that they form an inviting opening in their ranks for wild birds to alight upon—within shotgun range of the hunters. When all is in readiness, the boat operator helps each body-booter get overboard without going head over tin cup. Their gear is pretty unwieldy, yet very necessary to prevent hypothermia.

Then the boat moves off, preferably to one side and downwind from the hunting area. It will retrieve downed birds—because you have no chance of wading fast enough to catch up to a floating goose, and because the bottom is dangerous. In places you can be walking hip deep and one more step will drop you in over your head.

Body-booters talk to each other a lot, for there is nothing else to do standing out there in the Bay with water up to your shirt pockets. In the colder part of the season, talking is also a method of reassuring each other that you haven't frozen to death—not yet! Body-booters always seem to be moving about, too, shuffling their feet and flexing their toes to keep their circulation going. They also watch the skies, especially the eastern skies from whence cometh the well-fed geese. When geese are sighted—usually Canadas—the hunter tries to hide behind his silhouette like a combat soldier trying to crawl up into his

helmet under fire. Hiding a well-padded 200-pound man and a long twelve-gauge behind a 28-inch decoy is difficult, but the decoy evidently does a good enough job to break up the human outline. Besides, geese simply do not expect to find a man wading around in the Bay, up to his chin in icy water. Geese think that men have more sense than that.

Crouching behind his tiny blind, the hunter uses his teeth to remove the mitten on his right hand, freeing up his trigger finger. The finger quickly turns blue and becomes rigid as the spray freezes on his skin. Expert callers give a couple of welcoming honks, not overdoing it, just indicating that they are hospitable to this new bunch of geese if that bunch wishes to join them at rest.

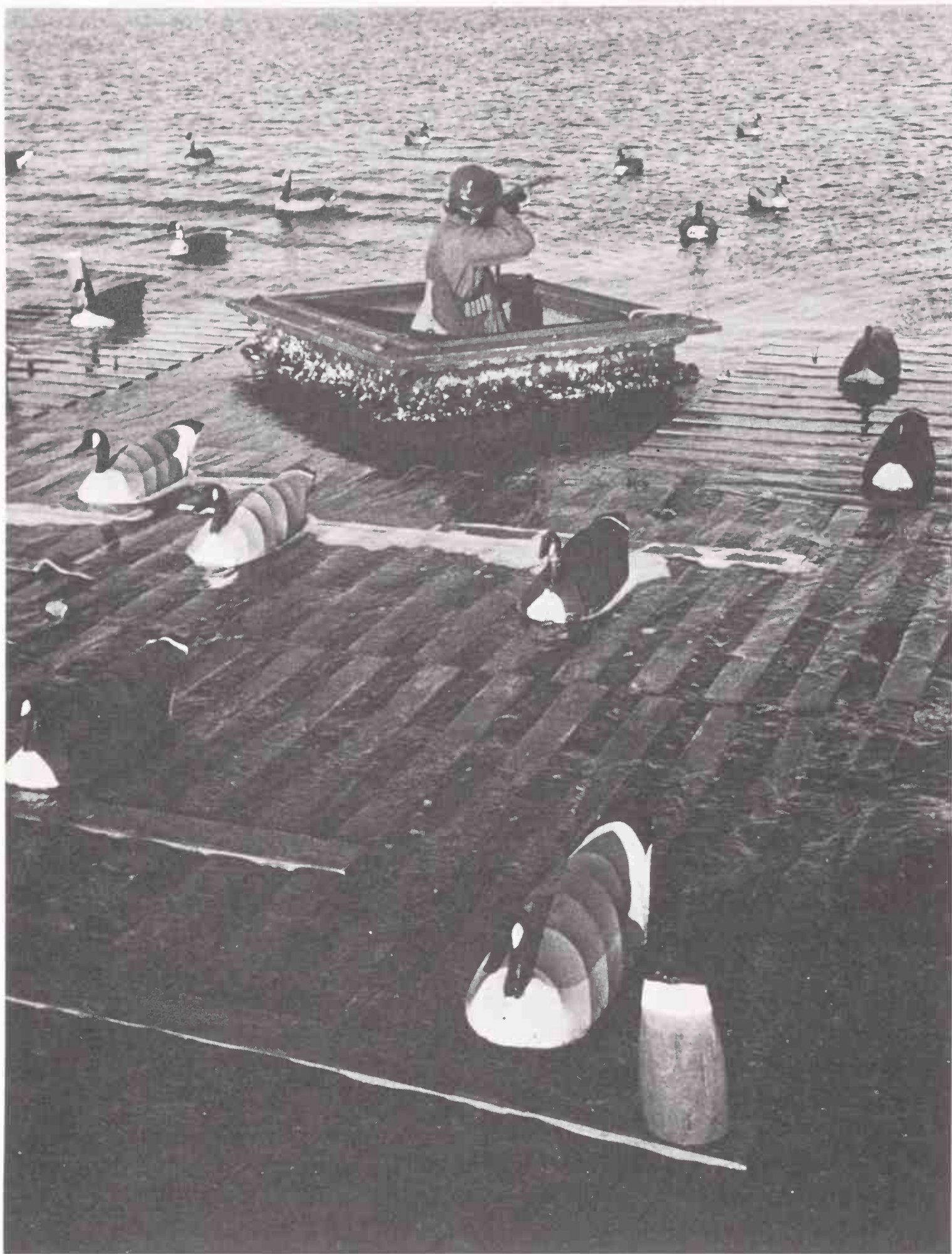
The geese come within range, the hunters rise up, clumsily shouldering shotguns, and they shoot. If they drop birds, they try to keep an eye on them until the boat can slip its anchor mooring and drift down to pick them up with a long-handled crab net.

On a Bluebird day, it's almost pleasant standing out there; but you feel like an idiot, for you're sure that geese won't fly at all on a day like that. On a wet, dismal, dark day, with a small chop making it difficult to stand, you feel more hopeful. Traditionally, this is goose hunting weather. But things are different on the Susquehanna Flats, and goose luck depends more upon the hunters on the Eastern Shore than it does on the weather. If the land-based hunters are "chowsing" the big birds around, the Canadas will come out on the Bay where they feel safe.

Safe is more than the body-booters can feel. Most of them are completely numb by the time a goose appears.

HUDSON BAY

Switch with me now to hunting Snows and Canadas on the western side of Hudson Bay, with Cree Indian guides. Body-booting might work here, for the great expanse of the Bay is shallow, but the temperatures and the uncertain nature of the winds rule this method out for safety reasons. There are many geese, and the Crees don't need an artificial call. They use their own throat to make the sounds of both species of geese and they are very good at it. With lots of geese around, the shooting just simply has to be good. These are the young birds of the year, understandably naive, for they are yet to run the gauntlet—the hunting season which, for them, is five months long,



A hunter draws a bead on an incoming goose from a sink-box blind used in North Carolina. Some decoys are full-bodied free floaters. Others are part of the blind itself.

starting in September in Canada and ending in late January on the Gulf Coast.

There are three problems with hunting in this area. First of all, it's a long, expensive trip to get there. Second, fog sometimes hides the whole scene for days at a time. Third, there are Polar Bears. I've never tried it, but I want to. The law says that you can shoot a Polar Bear as a last resort to save your life. I wonder how a load of twelve-gauge No. 2's would affect a thousand-pound bear? Come to think of it, I guess I'm not really anxious to find out.

SINK-BOX BLINDS

On the broad, watery expanse of Pamlico Sound in North Carolina, hunters reach their sink-box blinds by boat in the pre-dawn dark. There they sit comfortably—if a bit damply—in the center of a big wooden contraption. The center is the waterproof—well, almost waterproof—box which serves as their blind. Its one- by four-inch rim is all that rises above the water at high tide.

Floating wooden frameworks spread out on three sides of the sink-box blind. Made of one-by-four or one-by-six lumber laid flat, this framework supports the goose decoys which will lure wild birds down into range. The framework also has another value—it helps to still the waves which otherwise might break over the 4-inch board around the hunter. Sometimes a few silhouette decoys are placed with the full-bodied decks which are permanently attached to the floating frame, and sometimes full-bodied floaters are anchored farther out to add to the spread.

Seen from the goose's point of view, the arrangement looks very innocent. The incoming bird sees only geese feeding or resting on the surface of that vast inland sea known as Pamlico Sound. The hunter will have crouched low to prevent reflections from his eyeglasses or his face.

Retrieving can be a problem here, unless a small boat is anchored out at a distance to do it. Pamlico Sound is not a good place to go for a stroll. Despite its "pretty far south" location, the Sound is subjected to sudden windstorms, along with surprising drops in temperature. Lives have been lost in this type of hunting; it's no place for amateurs. For those who know it well, however, this is a very effective way to bop a goose or two.



Oysters and barnacles are growing on the sides of this sink-box blind used by North Carolina hunters on Pamlico and Currituck Sounds.

THE ALEUTIAN ISLANDS

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At Izembek Lagoon, in the Aleutians, a very few hunters are fortunate enough to enjoy the long season and generous bag limit which is set on the Emperor Geese, Brant Geese and Canada Geese which work this area, just outside the Izembek National Wildlife Refuge. Some years the daily bag limit for all species combined totals up to twenty-eight birds per day—which is not exorbitant because of the very light hunting pressure. The big attraction for the birds is the world's largest bed of eelgrass, a favored goose food.

Hunters wait on the beaches for the high tide to float the feeding birds up and away from the eelgrass. Feeding heavily at low tide, the birds refuse to dive deep enough to continue feeding on the very high tide. So when the high tide forces them away from the dinner table, they fly to the beach—giving the waiting hunters some good shooting. Then they trade back and forth, waiting for the next low tide, acting as if they were starving while they wait for the lush growth to be uncovered again. At this high-tide period, the goose hunter comes into his own—especially on the most beautiful of our geese, the Emperor.

NEW MEXICO

Well before hunting season, hundreds of New Mexican hunters gather in a big auditorium for a crash course in recognizing Snow and Blue Geese. After they pass an examination—by marking “shoot” or “don’t shoot” as identification slides are flashed on a screen—they receive a certificate attesting to their prowess.

This certificate is a prerequisite for application to hunt during the permit-controlled, limited Snow Goose hunt which is held each year on the Bosque del Apache National Wildlife Refuge. It is necessary to be very careful about which large white bird you shoot, for the Bosque is now the wintering home for a few of the world's rarest big birds—the Whooping Cranes. By “egg-napping” from Wood Buffalo Park in Canada, Fish and Wildlife Service biologists have obtained Whooping Crane eggs for rearing. The eggs are substituted for Sandhill Crane eggs on the crane breeding grounds at Gray's Lake National Wildlife Refuge in eastern Idaho. Raised by parent cranes, the young Whoopers follow their adoptive parents to their normal wintering ground on the Bosque. This program is intended to spread out the Whooper

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population as it makes a comeback from the brink of extinction—thus avoiding the danger of having all our eggs in one breeding ground.

Realizing that it is desirable to hunt the Snow Goose flock which has its southern migration terminus at the Bosque, the FWS planned a limited, tightly controlled hunt on a small part of the refuge acreage. Knowing that the hue and cry would be terrific if a Whooper were ever shot by a hunter, the FWS entered into its educational program.

In addition to the preliminary qualification tests, the lucky permittees, who are selected by computer, must go through a short refresher course in the darkness before the morning hunt. Then hunters are assigned to blinds, provided with a two-way radio which is left on at all times and trucked out to their hunting areas. The hunters are each allowed only eight shells, to discourage sky-busting, and the shells must be the new steel shot, to prevent a possible buildup of lead shot—cause of lead poisoning—on refuge lands. Refuge personnel use a magnet to determine if the shells are really steel.

Hunting begins at the usual legal time each morning, but is all over by 10 o'clock, at which time the radio tells you to get out of your blind and head for the roads to be picked up.

Why the radios?

During the shooting period, refuge personnel atop lookout towers are surveying the area constantly to find out if any Whoopers are leaving the sanctuary area. If one starts flying around, all hunters are immediately put on notice by means of the radio. If a Whooper flies toward a hunt area, the radio orders an immediate cessation of all shooting—as long as the Whooper is in the area.

Are the hunters careful about the Whoopers? You can bet your best handcarved goose decoys they are. The fact that the killing of a Whooper could bring a fine of \$20,000 and two years in jail is reason enough to be careful.

Sound like a regimented hunt? It is. But it is also one which is enjoyed by hundreds each year. It is a good compromise between the two objectives—protecting the rare Whooper and accomplishing a healthy hunt on the growing population of Snows and Blues.

Sure, it's not untrammelled sport, like hunting Emperors at Izbek, but it is a hunt which pleases both the hunter and the devoted crane protector. Come to think of it, the hunter *is* the crane protector. It's the hunters' money which has made possible the growth of the national wildlife refuge system. Through license fees and through the excise tax on sporting arms and ammunition, the goose hunter has always paid his own way in this world—and also paid for the protection of countless species which are not hunted.

Diapers as Decoys *—the Gulf Coast*

WHEN THE first Europeans set foot on the Western Hemisphere, the greatest wintering concentration of migratory geese on the North American continent was probably in that arc which runs from New Orleans, Louisiana, across Texas to Port Lavaca. Swing a line about 100 miles inland from the blue waters of the Gulf Coast. Within these limits you've taken in most of the goose wintering grounds of the Gulf area, the pre-Columbian goose winter resort *par excellence*.

This Gulf Coast arc was a primeval mixture of grassy prairies and salt-grass marshes, a land which never froze solid, a land which provided everything the continent's geese needed for the greater part of their year. There were probably no blue-phase geese in those years—or at best, only a few—but the white bird we call the Lesser Snow Goose made the Lissie Prairies–Eagle Lake region of Texas and the sprawling marshes of Louisiana its winter home by choice—by choice of millions of geese. They came in October and stayed until late February, sometimes into April.

Whitefronted Geese which nested in Alaska followed a northwest–southeast path to this magic arc. Of most importance to the goose hunters, many races and families of Canada Geese also wintered here. Some of these birds flew short migration paths from breeding grounds in Nebraska, Iowa, Minnesota and the Dakotas. Others flew from the northernmost reaches of Canada. These Canadas spanned the entire size spectrum. Migrants from the northern prairie states were usually the big goose—the *maxima* family—which was the first race to be decimated by the settlement of the plains by white men. But the smallest of Canadas also found their way here, and those in be-



Even the retriever wears a white sheet to do double duty as a decoy in this picture of Lissie Prairie Snow Goose hunting—which also produced a Canada.

tween. These smaller birds have been the most reliable returnees of all Canadas wintering in the Gulf Coast area.

For all practical purposes, the Ross's Goose doesn't come to the warm and sunny Gulf Coast—he prefers the central valleys of California. The Greater Snow Goose was and still is restricted to the Atlantic Flyway. But the rest—Blues, Snows, Whitefronts, Giant Canadas and Little Canadas—found their winter resort in Texas and Louisiana.

Much has changed. First and foremost, a great megalopolis of humanity, including the nation's sixth-largest city, now has spread from the Louisiana border to south of Corpus Christi, usurping much of the prime wintering ground. A tremendous petrochemical complex has also sprung up, using more of the wintering ground. But many of the changes have also taken place farther north along the Flyway.

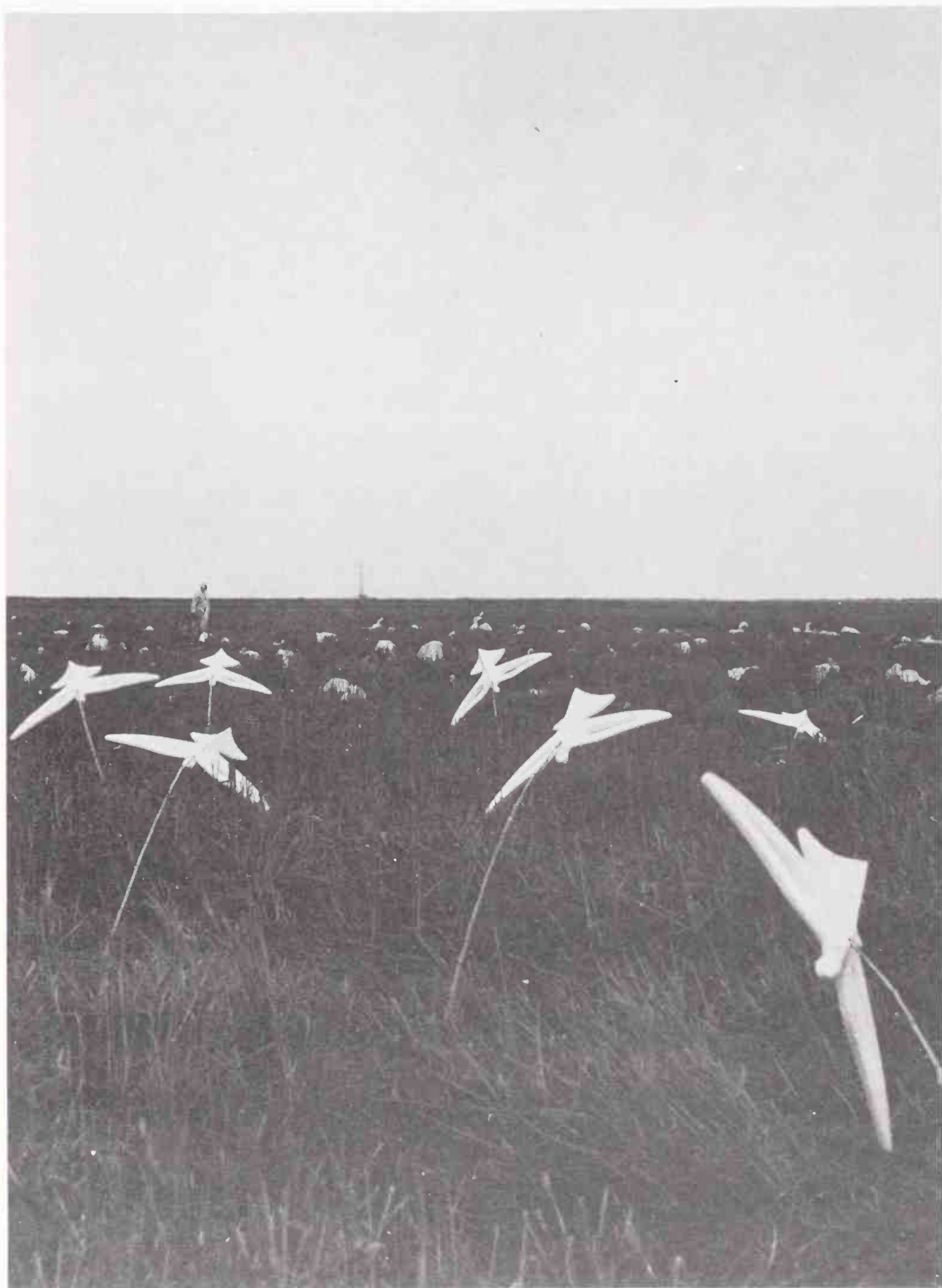
After losing the big Canadas to human encroachment on their prairie breeding grounds—after having their flocks shortstopped north of them—after seeing the flights of Whitefronts and other geese from the remotest parts of the continent greatly reduced during the 30's and early 40's—even after seeing its specialty, the Snow Goose, wintering farther north—even after all of these losses, the Texas-Louisiana wintering area still offers some of the best and the most varied goose hunting in the United States. As a result of the wide variety and the big concentrations of wintering birds, hunting techniques in this crescent are perhaps the most interesting in America.

For example:

We left Houston early one winter morning, drove for fifty minutes and then joined our host, Joe, for a ten-minute drive across muddy fields in his four-wheel-drive buggy. He drove along a return-flow irrigation ditch to the rice fields we would hunt. There we unloaded two thermos bottles of coffee, shells, guns and other paraphernalia and donned all-white parkas, or coveralls, which were long enough to fit anyone. "You can get away with anything, even get away with moving around, if you're dressed in white," Joe said. Then he drove off to place two other hunters at another spot a half-mile south toward the Gulf of Mexico.

We entered newly dug pits, lined with cypress boards and equipped with board seats. These were newly placed and, with the groundwater level running about 2 ¼ inches below the surface, we had to bail fifty gallons of water out before we could get in them. The cypress evidently had to have time to swell and fit tightly, because the water didn't seem to seep in again after we bailed it out.

At least two hundred shell decoys, all white, spread out on the muddy field to the east of us, and another five hundred white shapes



Rude Snow Goose decoys on willowy stakes blow in the wind, simulating the flying activity of Snow Geese—an effective ruse on the Texas wintering grounds.

were spread across the field as far as I could see with my eyes at blind level. As it got full light, I made out that these extra white shapes were pieces of cloth, tied to a stake. Off to the north, about forty yards from our blind but farther than that from any snow decoys, was a tight little group of about twenty Canada Goose decoys.

I liked that idea. Although Canadas were not the most prevalent species here, I did want to have some Canada deeks out. The aristocratic Canada hates to set down right with the Snows. However, the sight of a field full of feeding white geese is a pretty good argument that the field is safe to land upon—even to the more wary Canada.

A hiss from my partner, Pete Harrison, brought me back to the present. His eyes were fixed on a group of white geese coming swiftly across the light breeze, heading for our spread. They came in straight to the stool—trusting and unafraid on opening day. I got to thinking about the long trip they had made to get here—from the Baffinland nesting area? From Arctic islands? Who could tell? They evidently had either flown over or missed all of the hunting pressure on their way down, for they came straight in—just twenty feet off the ground. I picked an adult white bird, and then another adult, a blue phase. If I had been a bit quicker, I could have bagged three geese from one flight, a feat which I have only accomplished twice in my misspent life.

Pete grinned in triumph, “Nailed three myself. What held you back?”

Ignoring the wiseacre nature of his remark, I said, “I pick out only full-grown birds. I don’t pick on those pinfeathery babies you shoot.”

He knew it was a case of sour grapes, and retrieved his three immature Snows without a word. He spread them in front of the blind to serve as additional decoys. As if any more were really needed!

Pete was a veteran goose hunter of the Gulf Coast, and he had his own theories about the composition of the flocks.

I think we’re holding our own on the Specklebellies, and that’s a pious pleasure, ’cuz they’re my favorite eating. We get a few less Canadas each and every year, according to what I see coming over my blinds—and I think most of that decrease is due to shortstopping farther north. Why, hell, Chuck, my daddy moved to Texas from Missouri because the goose hunting was better down here—among other reasons, my daddy being an intelligent man. If he knew that those danged Missourians were getting the geese that used to come down here, why he’d do a spinning act in his grave that would probably puzzle seismograph crews all over the Texas oil patch.

I suggested that he was getting more Snows and Blues to compensate for the fewer Canadas, but that remark got nowhere.



White-camouflaged hunters draw a bead on a pair of incoming Canadas in the Texas Gulf Coast wintering area.

“Swapping Canadas for these sausage geese would be a mighty lousy trade, in my way of thinking,” he drawled. 101

But the pitiful truth is that we aren't getting enough total geese any more to make up for the loss of the Canadas—we only get the smaller Canadas now and I don't understand why. But there's another bad thing about the species composition. We got more and more Blues and Snows each year for a spell, both blue and white birds were looking good. Guess we have to give credit for good management up nawth for that. . . .

In the interests of scientific accuracy, I had to interrupt.

Pete, nobody really manages Snows and Blues. We know almost nothing about their breeding-ground conditions, nor about their nesting success at the time the seasons are set each summer. It's a case of set the rules and hope that enough Snow Geese come down the Flyway to fit those rules. If we made a mistake—like setting a generous bag limit in a year when the Snow Goose had lousy nesting success—we'd have to find it out the hard way that fall, and we'd have to correct our mistake the next year by allowing fewer of them to be shot the next year. It's been my belief that we're always a full year behind with the data we need to manage these far northern nesters. But the population is healthy and strong, either growing or holding its own. So the system must be working.

“Well,” Pete said, “be that as it may, we're no longer getting *more* Blues and Snows each year. I think we get fewer Blues, at the same time you tell me that the blue phase is becoming a bigger percentage of the Snow Goose flock. Are the blue-phase birds more apt to winter up in Missouri, too, like some of our biologists tell me they are?”

I was about to expound on my theories about shortstopping Blues, but there was a more pressing matter—geese in the air, heading our way. I called them seven Snow Geese, two of them showing the dirty gray and rust-colored heads of juveniles. Pete hit the call a couple of times, not overdoing it. They turned toward us.

Something about the sound they made didn't set right. Then I caught it: the unmistakable laughing, melodious, “wah-wah” of the Specklebelly. There he was, farthest out, last bird on the right.

“Now!” Pete barked, and we came up aiming. Waiting till they started to flare up in alarm, I got a clear shot at the Speck and hit him with a load of fours. Feathers flew, and the goose tipped sideways, then righted itself. In desperation, I slammed another round at it and it hit the ground with a satisfying thump.

“How many?” Pete asked. Without looking, I could tell from the exultant tone that he had killed two more Snows and filled out his five-bird limit.

102 “I picked a Whitefront,” I said, and rejoiced in the surprised look on his face. I couldn’t help but rub it in. “You ought to be more selective, Pete. Here you are with five of what you call sausage geese. What are you going to do if some Canadas come by?”

I almost had a chance to rub his nose in it about fifteen minutes later. A flock of about twenty Canadas came over, circled twice as we both talked to them, then flared from something they didn’t like and went on south.

“Want me to help you shoot your limit?” Pete gibed at me. “I’d thought a good shot would be done and out of the pits ’fore this, what with all the birds that have come to us this morning.”

Looking down at my beautiful trio—a Snow, a Blue and a Speck—I grinned, “Now that I’ve got the class of the flight, I’ll pick out a few of your easy ones and we’ll go in.” As we waited and watched, I got to thinking that my remark might have been a bit too cocky. But it was opening day—a few dummies would come by.

About eleven o’clock Pete was finishing the last of his Cajun coffee. We each brought our own, because I can’t stand that oily, black, rancid, bitter stuff he likes, it being half chicory. Knowing that his patience usually expired at the same time he ran out of coffee, I knew that he’d start moaning unless I scored soon. Also it was about time that the geese quit flying until late afternoon, even if it was opening day.

The first dumb one came by himself, an immature Snow flying about fifteen feet above the ground, his head swiveling from side to side as he tried to recognize his siblings amid the diaper decoys spread out below him. Lonesome and talkative, he answered Pete’s call eagerly and came for our spread like your brother-in-law sitting down to a steak dinner at your house. I let him stretch his feet toward the ground, then I stood up. “Where should I drop this one?” I asked Pete. Then I nonchalantly shot. And just as nonchalantly, I missed! Surprised, I shot again, just as the bird hooked to the right, and scored another clean miss.

After listening to a lot of raucous laughter from Pete’s side of the blind, I had to listen to him tell that famous story of Justin Wilson’s, the punch line of which is: “The first time I shot I missed him, the second time I hit him in the same damn place.”

“Now I’m going to have to help you, since you cain’t shoot no better’n that.” I had to admit that he had a point, even though I politely questioned his undoubted canine ancestry. A trio of Snows followed by one Blue came too near ten minutes later. This time I concentrated and dropped two adult white birds to fill out our limit of ten geese.

I got needled again about my misses when the handyman, Étienne



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104 Roubideaux, came to pick us up: “I start to drive down that way three or two times, but somebody have a hard time to hit that baby Snow Goose, I gah-ron-tee.” I vowed to tell Joe that he ought to weed out lippy people when hiring help, but I forgot to. In fact, I conveniently forgot the whole episode right away.

Back at the ranch, I was telling Joe that it surprised me that geese would decoy to those spreads. The entire wet prairie had seemed to be one moving, seething mass of white. We had seen white styrofoam airplanes, atop willowy sticks, moving in the wind. We had seen white cloths tied atop stakes, and the cloths were diapers! “Cheaper to buy the disposable ones, and they work just as good,” Joe said. We had seen hundreds of paper plates, tossed out at random. We had seen crumpled newspapers—anything white. We had even seen a black Labrador completely shrouded in white. Trouble was, he kept trying to return to his original color by rolling in the mud. We had even seen a Snow Goose kite, complete with black wing tips, flying above one spread, and its owner was the proud possessor of a limit of Snows.

Out of the twenty hunters who had each paid Joe twenty bucks for the privilege of hunting on his land, there were seventeen limits. “Other three guys musta been Yankees,” Joe allowed, “’cuz there couldn’t be no other reason for being such lousy shots.”

Although I’d learned long ago that anyone north of the Red River boundary of Oklahoma was considered a Yankee in these parts, I let that one go. The seventeen limits, totaling up to eighty-five birds, consisted of seventy-three Snow Geese, five Whitefronts, six Blues and one Canada.

“That Canada came out of the blind on the edge of the big pond,” Joe said, “and that guy won’t believe me when I tell him that there’s a big gator in that pond. That guy’s from Houston. He’s got a small black retriever of his own. Good dog. But if my memory serves me right—which it purely does most of the time—bull alligators has been known to dine on dog right smart often.”

That reminded me of the time I yielded possession of a Blue Goose to a gator. I think I had legal possession rights, because I had caused the demise of that bird with a load of shot. However, the gator had actual possession, for the simple reason that he moved out into the pond and lay there with his eyeballs sticking up out of the water, about ten inches from the goose, for at least twenty minutes. Then he inhaled the goose under litigation and submerged with it. I would have liked to pursue my claim in an appropriate court of law, but I wasn’t about to wrestle a bull ’gator for a Blue Goose. Now if it had been a big Canada, I might have decided to fight him for it—but probably not.



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We spent most of the day arguing about geese: Where they come from, where they're wintering now, whether there are really more Canadas in the world than there used to be, or do "They just stay up north where the federal biologists can count them, 'stead of coming on down to where the Good Lord intended them to winter."

The next day we limited out early. I got two dark geese—a White-front and a Canada that weighed about four pounds—and three Blues. Pete got a big Canada, a rarity in these parts, and four Snows. We both bellyached about the shortage of dark geese, but I had to quit complaining when I started thinking. Where else in the world could hunters have a crack at Snows, Blues, Whitefronts and Canadas on one hunt? Where else in the world do geese decoy to diapers?

There's almost no public land in this great arc of wintering geese, so the hunter must expect to pay for his hunting spot—either on a day rental basis, or as an annual fee. Or maybe he will get invited by a friend. Friendship is still mighty important in both Texas and Louisiana.

But it still doesn't seem right to use disposable diapers!

“L’Oie Blanche”

IN THE FALL of 1974, I took a trip to *La Belle Province*—Quebec—and to the mighty Saint Lawrence to hunt the Greater Snow Goose—*Chen hyperborea atlantica*—which migrates down the eastern edge of this nation to wintering grounds spanning the coastal marshes from Chesapeake Bay to Florida.

At Montmagny, Quebec, I paid an attendant \$2 Canadian for the privilege of parking my Huntsman Camper on his lot while I took a boat trip out to the Isle aux Grues—the Island of Cranes. Montmagny’s reputation for Greater Snow Geese was justified by the sight of two thousand of the big white birds contentedly rooting in the mudbanks right off the dock where the boat moored. Since the area was designated as a goose refuge, we contented ourselves with looking. Hunters returning from the isle all carried geese, however. Things looked mighty good for my hunt.

During the half-hour run out to the island, Snow Geese were everywhere, flying around us and over us. The sun set before we docked, and still the melodious honking came to our ears out of the soft darkness of the October evening.

When we reached the island, we had to carry our guns and bags up a ladder to reach the dock, which was high above the river now that the famed Saint Lawrence tides had dropped out from under us. There was no one in sight. It was now very dark and very quiet—except for the geese. To combat the sinking feeling that something had gone wrong, I went back on board to ask directions. My questions in English and the responses in French did neither me nor the skipper much good. I displayed a letter from Patrick Desdemaines-Hugon, who was organizing our trip, in the light of the charthouse. The skipper pointed to the return address and nodded agreeably. Then he pointed to a little shed at the end of the dock, where he indicated there was a telephone.

I found the hand-cranked phone and gave it a healthy twist, even

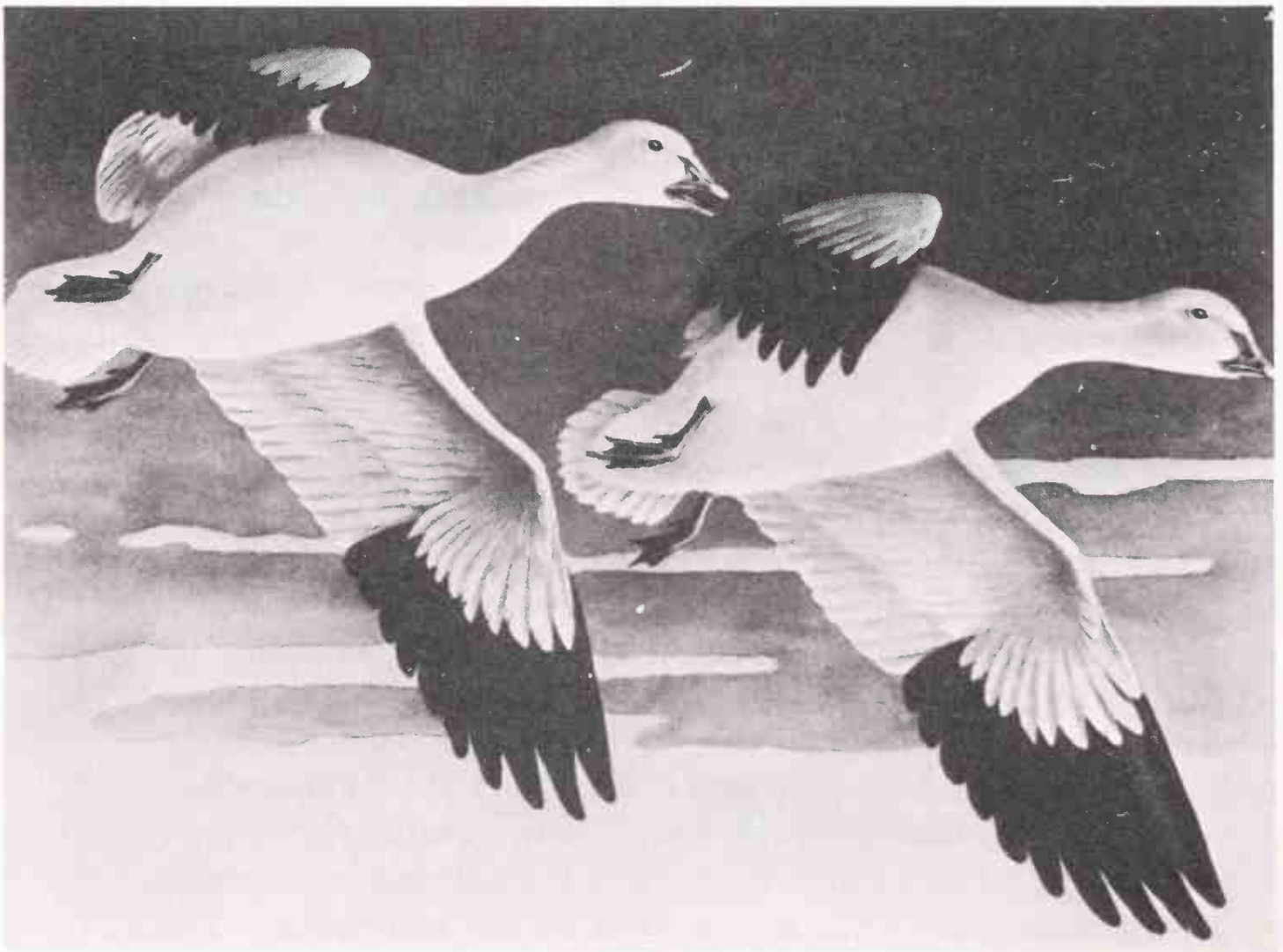
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108 though I feared I wouldn't be able to communicate with the person at the other end of the line. The response was quick and Gallic, "Allo?"

In desperation, I plowed right into the whole controversy of *La Part Québécois*: "Do you speak English?"

I'm ashamed to tell you how relief flooded over me when the woman at the other end of the line answered, "But yes, *M'sieu*. Can I help you?"

The language barrier overcome, she carried on a bilingual conversation between me and some unknown person at the other end of the wire, with the pleasant result that a panel truck materialized out of the night. After loading my gear aboard, the driver provided one-way transportation (and a one-way conversation in French) to Le Domaine de Suroit, a remodeled farmhouse with stone walls so thick they were called "*formidable*," pronounced "*for-mee-dawb*." The building had a solid look of respectability, which it had earned by withstanding the winds of the Quebec winters for more than a hundred years.



Famed wildlife artist Jack Murray made this drawing of Snow Geese in flight and won the 14th annual Migratory Waterfowl Hunting Stamp contest with his work.

No one spoke English at the lodge, but they all spoke the universal language of hospitality. After being shown to my comfortable bedroom, I washed off the road dust in a modern bathroom and was ushered into dinner—family style, in the big dining room.

Fourteen others joined me at the table. All fourteen spoke French—expressively, loudly, steadily and exclusively. The conversation was dominated by a gigantic blond man of about 350 pounds. He looked at me and said something very humorous, judging by the volcano of laughter which followed. Then he brought glasses and poured red wine for me with a flourish. I said “*merci*” so often that I finally had to say “mercy.”

The food was excellent; simple and deliciously seasoned. The *pièce de résistance* was wild goose. Knowing that *L’Oie Blanche* tasted that good, I wanted to take home as much as the law allowed.

Then Patrick Desdemaines-Hugon arrived and immediately began speaking to me in good, though heavily accented, English. He was an improbably red-bearded man, born in North Africa of French parents, who was making his living guiding and outfitting sportsmen. To my intense chagrin, two of my table-mates chimed in and spoke excellent English to me for the rest of my stay. Why they had refused to answer my earlier overtures in English remains a mystery to this day—even though I realize that the *Québécois* is intensely proud of the French language, his mother tongue.

Pleasantly stuffed, I turned in early after checking the weather one more time. The air was balmy, the thermometer at 45°F, with a heavy mist rising from the Fleuve Saint-Laurent. I fell asleep to the musical calling of the geese flying close overhead.

I awoke at 3:30 to a very different sound. The shutters rattled in a terrific wind that tested the solidity of the stone walls of Le Domaine de Suroit. The night looked very dark and very cold. I went back to sleep.

The alarm clock woke us to a changed world. The thermometer had dropped from the mid-forties to the teens and everything was frozen solid. The soft breeze had become a wind with a bitter, biting edge—a wind that was coming from the same place the Snow Geese had left, the land beyond the north wind. As we stowed away a mountain of breakfast, my bilingual friends informed me that the geese were all gone, heading south, and most of the wise hunters were planning to depart also. We all went out to see for ourselves.

With two pairs of thermal underwear and two pairs of woolen hunting pants inside my chest waders, I found it hard to move, but I felt that the insulation and the waders were definitely *de rigueur*. Shotgun and shells weighed me down even more as I followed my

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110 guide—bilingual, thanks to *le bon Dieu*—to the truck for the drive down to the north side of the island. Although the dawn was already breaking, we were not really late; for here the shooting hours are determined by the tides, not the sun. As the eight-foot tide drained down off the flats, I imagined that I could hear a sucking sound, like a kitchen sink draining. The guide's metabolic clock was set with the tides, and he decided that it was now time to follow the retreating waters. First he picked up a bale of dry straw and poked his shotgun barrel under the twine that bound it together. Then, putting the shotgun over his shoulder, he grabbed a five-gallon bucket and set out across a half-mile of slippery mud, which was already starting to freeze. I found walking through the mud very tiring, until I learned to imitate his peculiar gliding step, which allows you to make progress through the "San' Lauren'" mud with minimum effort.

At the water's edge we came to a wooden blind, completely buried in the mud and filled with water. The guide stood the bale of straw on its end and balanced his shotgun across it. Then he began bailing out the blind. From his talk I learned that in Canada the blind was more properly called a "hide," in the manner of the British.

The cold was infiltrating through the layers of wool. I felt sympathetic pains for the guide, who was using rubberized cotton gloves as he bailed away, five gallons at a toss. Although it was heavy work, he never slowed until he had uncovered the shelf which was to serve as a seat. Then he splashed the silt and mud off the walls before it could freeze. When he had reduced the water level to about six inches, he gave the hide a final rinsing and spread the hay on the seat to provide a dry cushion. We quickly crawled into the hide's welcome protection from the wind.

I wanted to bail out the last six inches of water, but his answer was logical: "The water, which has not frozen, must be warmer than the air—which most assuredly, *M'sieu*, has frozen!"

That day was an interminable struggle to keep from freezing solid, to keep circulation moving in my fingers, to keep an eye on the empty sky while hiding my face from the searching fingers of the wind, which seemed to increase in fury during the next six and a half hours. I admit to being pleased when I saw the water begin to rise on the side of a little stick I had jammed into the frozen mud to serve as an indicator. I didn't even feel guilty that I wanted to quit.

The guide didn't need any indicator; his whole life was attuned to the rise and fall of the tides. He said, apologetically, "We gotta start out now, or the water in that ditch will be deeper than we can wade." He sounded disappointed that our lovely hunt was coming to an end. Frankly, I was never so happy as when the prickling in my feet reas-

sured me that they had not frozen solid after all. Walking back to higher ground brought the warmth back to my cold-stiffened body. We were soon back in the car and then back in the lodge where it was, at last, warm.

There was much activity, as *les Québécois* were carrying their gear out to the panel truck, leaving for home on the afternoon boat. No one had shot a goose that day; only a few reported even seeing *L’Oie Blanche*. There was one report of a flock of two hundred, high above and heading directly south, which seemed like a good idea at the moment. But I waited, for I had come a long way—and the weather might change.

“The geese we had here are all in the States now,” claimed Patrick Desdemaines–Hugon. “That is, all of the big bunch. But those birds which Phillipe saw are a new wave of migrating geese triggered by this cold front. There will be more. Our chances are not what I would call good, but we do have a chance to kill some geese tomorrow.”

Perhaps it was the Remy Martin talking, but I had hopes that the weather would change. We could have another week of Indian summer after the first blast of winter; it had happened before. But when Patrick toasted, “To the goose we kill tomorrow,” I told him that I had little hope. I was staying simply because I had planned a three-day hunt and tomorrow I hoped to take some pictures in the surrounding area.

My pessimism brought a frown. “Your chances are not good, that we agree, *mon cher*, but you have come such a long way, and we cannot let you go home without your goose!”

An hour later, as he sipped his calvados, Patrick’s face brightened with new determination. “Come,” he said. “We will go down to the village and see if we can talk the best hunter on the whole island into guiding you tomorrow. He can talk to the geese in their own tongue. Then your chances will be as good as we can make them—after that, the answer will be up to *le bon Dieu*.”

We drove to a modest home in the village and Patrick introduced me to Michel, a man of sixty-five summers, handsome and sturdy, with piercing dark eyes and a stone face. I sat while Patrick engaged him in earnest conversation. I caught the words, “États-Unis,” and many times I heard the word for goose. The guide looked very doubtful, not at all anxious to take on the assignment.

The staccato French continued for more than an hour, and the warmth of the room made me very sleepy. Then Patrick switched to English and said, “I’ve promised him that you are not a sissy—that you will not complain of the cold, and that you will stay out with him as long as he thinks there is a chance of killing even one goose. If you

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112 agree to that, he will guide you—and he is the best guide in all the Saint-Laurent.”

Somehow I felt as though I were signing my own death warrant as I nodded agreement to this bargain. We went back to the lodge and I prepared all of my extra clothing for the ordeal of the morning. As I spread my extra socks to dry before the fire, I looked at the thermometer outside the window. It read exactly 7°F.

The temperature hadn't changed when I met Michel in the dark of the morning, but there was one difference—the wind had picked up considerably. He motioned me into the car and we started. He spoke no English and I spoke no French; it was mutually agreed that we wouldn't try to communicate by voice at all.

Twice we stopped the car while Michel got out to gauge the wind against his face as he turned slowly, looking toward the north. Each time he shook his head with an expression of exquisite distaste. It appeared that he held little hope for success that day.

After parking the car near two trees, we went skating and sliding across the frozen ground, balancing our bodies against the near gale-force wind. We caught up to the tide, held back by the wind out of the north, and waded in a couple of inches of water till we came to a different kind of hide. This one, on the far eastern end of the island, was of poured concrete, and appeared to have filled a cavity that had been blasted out of granite. Although I offered to help, Michel did all the bailing. He wasn't about to yield up any of that heat-generating exercise.

When we took our seats on the baled straw, I found that this hide was much shallower than the wooden ones, making it necessary to bend over to be hidden. If we sat erect, we were exposed from our shirt pockets up. I carried over a few rocks to break our silhouettes and to break the wind. Michel seemed to approve of that.

As I hunkered down, ready to start my ordeal by freezing again, I noticed a big ship, riding very high in the water, beating its way northward toward the open Atlantic. Part of the huge propeller rode out of the water, throwing spray in all directions as the wind tore the water from its grasp. The bow pushed a big wave ahead of it, and Michel eyed that bow wave with distrust. Obviously, he feared that it might be large enough to send water rolling over our rocky point—water which would surely douse us.

You could see the progress of that bow wave far back down the shoreline, breaking against the rocks. I watched with considerable interest, almost hoping that the wave would roll in and force us out. If we got wet, surely we would have to give up and go back to the car. I had just about decided that I could avoid a cold bath only by standing

up and letting the water swirl around my waders, when Michel tugged urgently at my sleeve. His eyes gestured toward the north. A long wavering line of geese were painted white against the dark hills of the northern bank!

I forgot about the bow wave. I even forgot to shiver, for excitement took the place of the body heat which was being sucked out of me by the cold rock, cold water and cold wind. The geese came on steadily, slanting lower and riding down toward our end of the island. My guide showed only the top of his hunting cap and a pair of glinting black eyes. He cupped his *bare* hand to the side of his face and began to talk to those geese, telling them of the fine welcome awaiting them on this spit of frozen rock. He used only his own throat, unaided by artificial call of any kind; yet he spoke pure Snow Goose. As he called, his eyes switched rapidly back and forth—first to the oncoming geese, then to the oncoming bow wave.

The geese were moving out, perhaps influenced by the big ship. We could hear them talking over the sound of the wind. They turned more and more westward, passing down the length of the island.

Michel gave an eloquent Gallic shrug, his eyebrows posing a question about the nature of a God who would allow such a thing to happen. His thin line of a moustache tightened into a straight line again, and he went back to watching the northern skies. Forgotten, the bow wave slithered in behind us and hissed across the frozen rocks. It came within an inch of topping the edge of the hide, then slid—disappointed, I think—back to the choppy gray water of the Fleuve Saint-Laurent.

Risking instant freezing of my wrist, I pulled my mitts down far enough to look at the time. It was 2:15. Simple arithmetic told me that we had less than an hour to wait until the tide would come flooding in, allowing us to leave this tortured spot with our honor intact. Black clouds were beginning to roll up over the north bank, although we were still in bright sunlight.

In such a situation you try to shrink even smaller in your clothes, try to make of your protesting body an even smaller target for the searching fingers of cold. You grow slowly more miserable, slowly less aware of the cold, slowly more resigned to freezing on the river bank.

And then, unbelievably, Michel was going “Pssst!” and a string of gleaming white geese was sliding down the side of the dark cloud to the north. I turned my head slowly to stare at the river. There was no ship in sight this time. Now our problem was to make the geese swing within range, if they could hear Michel’s calls over the keening of the wind.

Following some primordial guidance, the wavering line came on—

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114 riding an invisible chute down from the hills to the north, riding a wind which would boost them to Florida in two days if they chose to ride it that far. They passed two hundred yards to the west, passed without changing course, passed without even hearing the entreaties which Michel sent after them.

Sick with the repeated disappointments, I cursed the fates as I watched the geese swing on out of sight, but Michel was climbing out of the hide. He gestured for me to come quickly! Too cold to think, I lumbered uncomprehendingly with the clumsy grace of a half-frozen elephant, numbed by cold and encumbered by the sheer weight of my garments. We reached a place where two sheets of ice were tilted up against the incoming tide. We knelt behind them, out of the direct blast of the wind. Before I had time to wonder why we had deserted the shelter of the hide, which I was already remembering as warmer than this position, Michel announced "*Attendez*" with considerable vigor. Another group of geese was coming!

Guided by the same instincts, they followed the same course down over the dark hills and set their course for the point of rocks we hid upon. At first I was afraid that they were going to pass over the concrete blind that we had just vacated, but Michel knew his geese. Slowly, ever so slowly, their line of flight swung to the westward, closer and closer to our hiding place.

Then they were upon us! The air was filled with the gleaming of white wings and the sounds of the Greater Snow Goose.

I found myself on my feet, swinging a shotgun barrel which felt natural again. The end of the barrel reached the end of the outstretched beak of a big bird and I touched it off. The gun bucked, and I thought I had missed. My eyes filled with tears, partly from the stinging pain of the wind, partly from a terrible feeling that I was about to blow my one chance—after I had come so far and endured so much with Michel.

I found a second target to the east, almost at ground level. At the first shot he tilted up, battling gamely for altitude and safety while the wind pushed him down as it hurtled him past me. I swung quickly, touched off the shot and saw the goose crumple and come to ice in a long slide which fetched up against a rock.

Jamming shells into my gun, I swung about, but there were no more birds within range. I clumped over to pick up my goose, noting the three parallel red marks where he had spilt his blood on the white ice. He was a beautiful big bird. For the first time that day I forgot the pain of cold. I was almost warm as I hefted him and turned toward Michel. Then I saw that he was carrying the other bird, my first target—the one I thought I had missed.



116 In sign language I asked him if he had shot. He pointed to the shiny green Remington cases on the ice. Then he pointed to his own vest, stuffed with the canary yellow of his Canadian-made shells. Dramatically, he looked all around. There were no other empty shells on the ice.

Michel shouldered both birds, then pointed his gun barrel at the first thin sheets of wind-blown water which were ascending our rocky spit. The tide was coming back. He turned toward the car, about a mile away over the frozen mud. "*S'il vous plaît?*"

Walking worked the pain out of my body. The stinging even left my face until the car's heater blast started it tingling again. Back at Le Domaine de Suroit, Michel was accepting the compliments of the cook, who had declared earlier that only he would have any chance at taking a goose on a day like that.

I asked Patrick Desdemaines-Hugon to take my picture with my two geese, posed against the side of the outbuilding. On the wall behind me was painted the message, "*Pas de botte, dans la maison!*" I thought it was a heraldic expression, emblematic of man and his struggle over nature. In a way, I was right. Translated, it meant, "Don't bring your boots into the house."

I'm going to have to learn that language, the language spoken by the men who hunt *L'Oie Blanche* on the island in the Saint Lawrence.

Goose Hunting with a Mexican Accent

THE WHISTLING of wings and the soft “wah-wah, wah-wah” overhead told me that the Whitefronts were coming off Mexico’s Laguna Bustillos, heading out to the Mennonite farm country for their breakfast.

Ten minutes later, the chatter of Lesser Snow Geese and Blue Geese was almost deafening. The birds sounded as though they were no higher than forty feet off the ground I stood upon, yet—strain as I might—I couldn’t see a single feather!

It was 8:30 and I had been listening to the same birds since 6:45. So near and yet so invisible. The morning flight was going to be all over before this “*muy mala neblina*” lifted enough so that I could see my son Dan, only fifty yards away, also trying to stare holes in the dense fog.

That’s hard to take, when you’ve come so far to hunt geese at Rancho La Estancia, Cuauhtemoc, Chihuahua, Mexico. But it reminded me of some of my earlier forays into the land South of the Border. One time we had a guide who drove all day long, stopping every ten minutes, or ten miles—whichever came first—to roll down the window on the stinking, exhaust-laden bus we were riding in. He would then place his ear to the opened window and listen. If he didn’t hear geese—and he never did—we would drive on. That wasn’t our idea of goose hunting and we told him so, long and loud. However, we spoke only English at that time, and believe me, he didn’t understand a word!

I’ve long been attracted to waterfowl hunting in Mexico because I enjoy uncrowded hunting. There is seldom a lot of competition from other gunners down in the land of friendly people, chili peppers, mariachi bands, lovely *señoritas* and high-priced shotgun shells.

118 Compared to the States, goose hunting is completely inconsequential in Mexico. There are few who can afford to own a shotgun and feed it. Most of the hunting is done by visiting guns from the United States and from Europe—which furnishes a surprisingly high percentage of customers for the hunting lodges. These lodges, it should be mentioned, are few in number.

There are many geese wintering in Mexico, but they are widely separated, for Mexico is a very large country. Brant and Snows winter down the West Coast, all the way to the southern end of the Baja Peninsula—but they are never present in numbers comparable to those found in the center of California, or on the Lissie Prairie in Texas or on the Eastern Shore of Maryland. No one can ever prove it right or wrong, but I've often heard the statement that we kill more waterfowl on opening day in one state—say Minnesota—than are killed in all of Mexico all year long. Another factor which limits the kill somewhat is that the geese are veterans when they reach Mexican territory. They have learned to be smart by dodging hunters for five months and for 3000 miles.

The fog had maintained its pea-soup consistency till nearly noon, when our guides picked us up and said, "*Muy malo*. We go for lunch now."

Manuel Enriquez took one look at our faces and knew that we had had little use for the Chihuahua license which had cost us \$46 U.S. He consoled us—in excellent English—with the news that the fog had burned off early at El Halcón, the other half of his extensive hunting spread over nearer to Laguna de los Mexicanos. "It never lasts all day, señores," he said. "You get your birds this afternoon, I think."

Late afternoon found us twenty miles from the Rancho, hunkered down in some weeds at the edge of a picked-over cornfield. Forty Snow Goose decoys were arranged in what we hoped was an enticing display. One hour before sunset the Snows began to fly off Laguna Bustillos. Down here the Snows make up almost all of the flock. Blues are so rare that the guides call them to your attention every time they see one.

The fog had disappeared about 2 P.M., and bright sunshine and cloudless skies brought thousands of geese off the lake to feed. Whitefronts, Snows and a few Blues were everywhere, except within range of our guns. Our first day of hunting ended, and we hadn't fired a shot.

"*Mañana*," the guide said, "*Mañana* we go for *las grullas grises* at El Halcón. *Hay veinte mille grullas!*" He said there were twenty thousand cranes at El Halcón, and cranes were one of the attractions here.

Manuel warned that we would have to get up “*muy temprano*.” The ride over to the hunt area, over very bad roads, would take ninety minutes.

Wake-up time was at 4:00, which cut down on any opportunities to dream about Snow Geese coming to the decoys. No jangling alarm bell—we were awakened by the soft voices of the men who brought orange juice and coffee. That’s the civilized way to start the day!

After enjoying a huge breakfast, we hung on while Manuel piloted us expertly over the incredibly rough road to the hunt area near Laguna de los Mexicanos. It was still dark when he dropped us off at the edge of a cornfield with instructions to walk 100 yards into the corn and wait for the morning flight. “They’ve been feeding all around here,” he said. We used no decoys. The prevailing belief is that Whitefronts fly away from decoys and Snows pay no attention to them at all. Our guides didn’t use calls, and they frowned on their use.

We didn’t have long to wait. Whistling wings told me that ducks were within good range long before I could shoot. By the time it was legal, there were Mallards feeding in the corn behind me, and more coming from all quarters. I feared that I would ruin my chances at geese and cranes by shooting, but the temptation was too great. Mallards at cornstalk height are not difficult targets; nevertheless, there were more than five empties on the ground when I bagged my fifth Mallard.

Mexican regulations allowed twenty ducks per day on Saturdays and Sundays, ten per day otherwise—a total of fifty in possession if you hunt over the weekend. But U.S. regulations allow only ten ducks and five geese to be imported into the States, and we didn’t want to kill more than we could take home.

The unmistakable sound of Whitefronts came from the wrong side—they were flying back toward the lake. I hunkered down, motionless, averting my face so that the sun wouldn’t glint on my glasses, until the sound told me that they were overhead. I came up firing at six Whitefronts that were at maximum range. I heard pellets hitting wing feathers, but the birds didn’t even flare—keeping on their steady pace down the edge of the cornfield. That was a big mistake, for that course took them over Dan, who fired twice, picking one Whitefront out of the sky. No more geese came within range that morning.

We ate *burritos* in the field, then wasted the afternoon in jump-shooting ducks en route back toward Cuauhtemoc, the center of the agricultural lands which the Mexican government practically gave to a group of Mennonite farmers from Canada. They promised the Mennonites no taxes and no military conscription for fifty years if

120 they would open up this unused, but potentially rich farmland, serving as an example for Mexican agriculture and increasing the food supply. The industrious Mennonites do little hunting, but their croplands are a magnet for the geese and ducks that winter in that huge valley.

We weren't after ducks, however; we wanted geese. By four o'clock we were again set up behind Snow decoys. But we shot only Whitefronts—bagging five before darkness put a stop to our sport.

Señor Enriquez told me that 70 percent of his clientele are Mexicans, with another 20 percent European and only 5 to 10 percent coming from the States. This is definitely luxury hunting and is priced accordingly. Seven-day hunts include guides, food, lodging, decoys and transportation to and from Chihuahua City. Meals and lodging are among the best I've ever enjoyed. Although the lodge recommends that you bring your own guns, we felt that it was easier to rent theirs for \$10 per day. They had Remington 1100's with 3-inch magnum shells, a real favorite all over Mexico.

The price in the winter of 1979 was \$600 U.S. per person. Five-day hunts run \$480 per person, U.S. currency. Of course, these prices may go up—seems like they always do.

You can bring two shotguns into Mexico for a permit fee of \$50 per importation. We worried about bringing our treasured guns into Mexico. A group of Mexican sportsmen, also hunting out of Rancho La Estancia, lost their Rancho-furnished guns and had all of their ammunition confiscated by the soldiers at a checkpoint on the highway near Cuauhtemoc. The permit for the guns, all legal and shipshape, had been accidentally left in another vehicle, and the permit must accompany the gun at all times. Even with the advantage of speaking Spanish and knowing the laws of their country well—one was a lawyer—the hunters were not able to talk the gendarmes out of the confiscation, which ruined a full day's hunting.

The soldiers, who serve as highway police, knew Rancho La Estancia. They knew Señor Enriquez, and they recognized the insignia on the side of the vehicle. Señor Enriquez took his permit and went to town that evening. After several hours, he returned with the guns. He had no complaint about the business, "We can have all of the guns we want, just so long as they are registered when we bring them into the country and as long as the permit stays where it belongs—with the gun it covers."

One of the Mexican hunters told me, "You do not have gun registration in your country yet, and I hope you never do have. This confiscation was a 'Mexican classic.' We seem to have a genius for making rules and then for snarling them in red tape."

On our last day of hunting, we did things much differently. We put our decoy spread five miles away from the big lake, in a field where we had seen geese feeding. The guides seemed to favor decoy placement within half a mile of the lake. It's my belief that both Snows and Whitefronts like to fly around a bit and work up an appetite before dropping in to feed. They seldom feed really close to the lake, unless that is the only food available.

By moving back from the water, we escaped the "sky-busting" which is endemic in Mexico, just as it is here. Although there were few other hunters working the area, they all insisted on shooting at every goose as it passed overhead, even if it was on oxygen. Most Mexicans use twelve-gauge guns chambered for the 3-inch magnum shells. They use copper-coated No. 2's or even buckshot, and the occasional bird they bring down from the stratosphere keeps them trying. They keep on sky-busting, although they must ruin a lot of guns by stretching the barrel that way.

The first bunch of Snows took a look at our decoys, but found them silent, so they sat down on another part of the same field. When the next big flock came, we began to talk to them with our calls. They promptly got right neighborly and swung into the decoys like a picture-book lesson in how it should work. We bagged our five Snows apiece that morning, but we still didn't collect any Sandhill Cranes. They are very wise and very cautious, and they possess very long necks.

Next time I go hunting in Mexico, I'm going to follow my own hunches, rather than letting the guides determine where and how we will set up. I'm going to practice calling Snows, too. Maybe I can learn to call geese with a Mexican accent.

The Federal Man

THE NUMBERS of migratory waterfowl of North America were declining at a frightening rate when this country first began to enforce its game laws. In addition to good management, good enforcement saved the ancestors of the birds we enjoy today. The lead man in this enforcement effort was the federal man—the United States game management agent.

For nearly half a century, the game agent had the deserved reputation of being an outdoorsman first, and a college-trained biological lawyer second. He also had, and still has, an almost perfect record of incorruptibility. Lots of high-placed game law violators learned that the game agent was not for sale. They also learned that he could not be moved by threats—like rifle shots through the window of his parked car, or phone calls hinting that his kids wouldn't come home from school unless daddy stayed out of the marsh.

Over the last thirty-five years, I have had the pleasure of knowing some of the best of this breed, starting when I met the late Harry A. Jensen in North Dakota. In addition to a lifelong love for wildlife, I also gained a healthy cynicism from Harry. As a state warden, I worked with him during the spring migration, when many thousands of geese fed across the fields of North Dakota. One morning in the springtime, we put the binoculars on a newly erected cornshock blind in a section of "hogged over" corn which the geese were using. The blind was occupied.

"You're younger than I am," Harry said. "Hotfoot it down there and see what that citizen has in mind."

After slogging through a quarter-mile of mud, I was greeted warmly by the blind's occupant. The blind contained only photo equipment, and its occupant identified himself as a professional photographer who specialized in wildlife shots. There is nothing illegal about taking pictures. We drove on.

Fifteen miles away, Harry suddenly braked and said, "I still got a

feeling that that bastard is shooting a "choke-bored Graphic!" His hunch was strong enough to act upon, so we headed back. This time, I got out with a walkie-talkie below a rise which hid the car and my approach. I got in position where I could see and waited.

A flock of Canadas swung low over the blind and the "photographer" swung a twelve-gauge with deadly effect. Two geese fell. I watched through binoculars as the culprit first concealed his gun in the center of a shock, then retrieved the geese and hid them under another shock a good thirty yards from the blind. I used the two-way and Harry joined me in moving in from two directions. We put the arm on him and found that he had a total of seven geese stashed away. Confident of his "photography" gambit, he had shot four before our first visit and stayed on to take another three after I left.

There was good reason to be suspicious, especially during the spring migration, for, as I have mentioned, the public was very slow in getting used to the idea that the season was closed in the spring. The courts were also slow to really punish a violator, and often tried the arresting officer instead. One judge in northwest Missouri once fined a man guilty of shooting five geese in the spring, suspended the fine, gave the birds back to the culprit and told me not to "bother with penny-ante stuff."

Despite the efforts of some of the best state officers to be found anywhere, southwestern Iowa was a violators' paradise during the spring flights. Flocks of birds moving north behind the "melting line" would hop from Squaw Creek Refuge to Forney Lake, a waterless lake bed. There were few roads in that area which were passable after a rain, let alone when a late blizzard soaked the region with wet snow. Almost every game agent in what was then Region Three of the Fish and Wildlife Service worked that area at some time in his career—Steve Creech, Harry Maltby, Everett Sutton, Gerry McClure, Rod Brevig, Dave Fisher, Wes Newcomb, Herb Duncan, many others. But they couldn't do the job alone.

No, the federal men were too few. Their success was due in great part to the cooperation they received from state officers, men like the late Frank Starr of Iowa. Frank turned down offers of federal appointment many times, because he wanted to remain in his home state. Sometimes the state officer was unable to move against a violator, simply because to do so would have cost him his job. In such cases, he gave the information to the U.S. agent, who moved in and made the arrest. Illinois was a prime example of this practice, although it happened in many states in which the game warden's job was a political appointment. In some cases, too, the state warden turned his information over to the federal man in order to have a case tried in

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124 federal court, because he knew he couldn't get cooperation from the state or local courts. It should also be noted that the USGMA had trouble getting his federal cases into court in some jurisdictions, and in these instances the route was reversed, with the federal man giving information to the state officer, who then filed the case in state courts. The USGMA had a rough time earning the respect of the U.S. Attorney, but once he earned that respect, he got cooperation, and the fear of the federal court was a major deterrent to many violators.

State officer–federal agent cooperation reached its peak in the ploy known as the “federal bogey man.” As Harry Jensen, USGMA, and Martin Myhre, North Dakota warden, practiced it, it was an art form. The ploy was used when they had lots of information, but no hard evidence. They would drive up to the violator's home in Harry's car, which carried federal license plates. Harry would stay in the car while Martin interrogated the suspect. In a neighborly way, Martin would accuse the miscreant of his crimes. The suspect would deny his guilt. Myhre would break off the conversation, go to the car for a conference with Harry and then repeat the whole operation a second time.

Each time he left Jensen in the car and went back to renew the attack, Martin would say, “That man is a federal officer and I don't want you to have to go to federal court. You're a neighbor of mine.”

If the miscreant still refused to admit his guilt, Jensen would earn his Oscar. He would jump out of the car, smoke spurting from his pipe, and yell at Myhre, “C'mon, Martin, I've got more important things to do than waste time on that pilgrim. He hasn't got enough sense to avoid federal court so, by God, we'll give him a taste of federal court!”

This usually produced a confession. But if it didn't, there was still another act. Jensen would add, in a tone that would have done credit to Peter Lorre, “Keep an eye on him so he doesn't skip the country, and I'll go get a federal arrest warrant!”

About that time, the miscreant would be begging Myhre to allow him to go into state court and lay his head on the block. It's a good thing that the violator didn't know it, but at that time the state courts were much rougher on a goose poacher than were the federal courts.

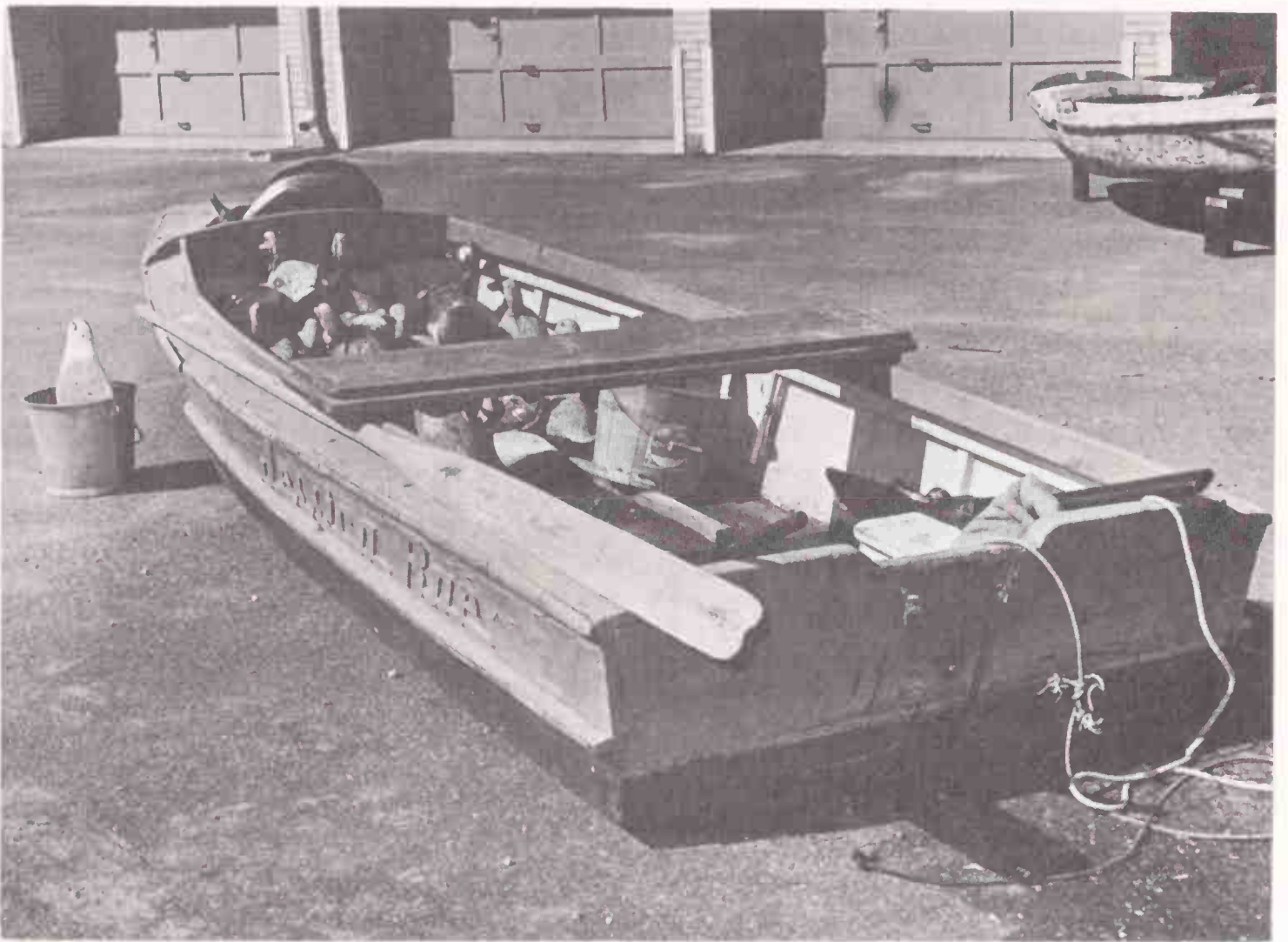
USGMA Gerry McClure spent the daybreak hours during a Nebraska snowstorm in the field without locating a single hunter. So he went into the local cafe for a ten o'clock breakfast. As he sipped his coffee, a husky young local came in bragging about how he “Got even with those geese today. Shot eleven of them flying low in the snowstorm.”

Congratulating the local on his good luck, McClure offered to bet him that he hadn't really killed eleven. The man took him up, and they bet a dollar. With three witnesses, McClure and the hunter went

out to the curb where the man opened his trunk. Looking at eleven geese, McClure handed over a dollar bill and said, "You win!" But before the man could close the trunk, McClure showed his badge. "And you lose," he said softly.

Ninety percent of the people approached by a game agent in the line of duty are carrying firearms. That makes tougher odds than are faced by any other law enforcement officer. It's a tribute to the law-abiding American hunter that most of them pose no danger to the game agent. But many game agents have been shot at, more than one has been hit and a few have been killed. One old-time game agent enjoyed his nickname of "Two Gun" and delighted in showing the gun wounds on his tough old carcass.

Remembering the way the hair stood up on the back of my neck when an Ohio man told me, "Touch that goose and I'll kill you," I can sympathize with the USGMA in a Deep Southern state who sent a telegram to his boss in Washington. It read, "Somebody is due to get killed down here and I don't want it to be me. How about a transfer?"



An old-time goose hunter's boat, dating from the market hunter days in the Chesapeake Bay region. Note that the Canada Goose figures prominently.

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126 The good game agent is a good psychologist. One agent had great luck at catching nonresident hunters hunting on a resident license. Approaching the hunter with a disarming grin, he would suddenly bark, "Where you from?" If the startled hunter said, "Beardstown" or "Cairo," he got only a cursory check. But if he replied, "Beardstown, Illinois," he was forced to prove his residence. The resident takes for granted that you know what state he lives in, but the nonresident is anxious to add the name of the state.

Larry Merovka, retired supervisor of USGMA's in the Southwest, likes to tell this one: Pierre had found a foolproof way to shoot ducks. He tied a bateau to the dock in the wildlife refuge—where fishing was permitted, of course. Underneath the dock, out of sight, he hung his shotgun on a couple of nails.

His *modus operandi* was to stroll down to the dock, wait until he was sure that nobody was around, then slide the gun into the bateau and pole off around the bend. He'd shoot a couple of birds, waiting half an hour before making the retrieve, just in case anyone heard the shooting. Then he'd pick up his birds, return gun and boat to their former places and melt into the brush with his birds. Learning of the system, the game agent waited for him to try it again.

Pierre shot two ducks, retrieved them, returned to the dock and hid the shotgun. He had taken off his shoes to retrieve the ducks from the mudbank where they fell. Picking up his shoes in one hand and the ducks in the other hand, he started walking away.

The game agent stepped out of his hiding place and called on Pierre to halt. Pierre took off in a dead run. Halfway up the rise, he threw away half of his load to lighten his step. It was to no avail; the game agent caught up and dropped him with a flying tackle.

Pierre looked up at the game agent in feigned amazement, "Wat you wan', hah?"

The agent retorted, "You can't shoot ducks on a refuge, fella!"

Pierre looked him right in the eye and said, "Wat duck you mean, hah?"

"I mean those ducks you got in your left hand."

Pierre looked at the ducks in disbelief as he said, "*Sacré bleu*, I trow those show and keep dose dam duck."

Because market hunting died slowly in the Illinois river bottoms, agents from other areas were often assigned there to work undercover. One agent, long since dead, decided to enliven a sunshiny Saturday morning with a little strategy. He drove into a sleepy river town and found a young black boy sitting on the curb, whittling. Pulling up alongside, the agent said, "I'm looking to buy me a few ducks."

He then went on to spin a tale about how he had told his wife he'd gone hunting, but instead had gone on a party. Now, he said, he needed a few ducks to establish an alibi. The youngster directed him to a house down the street, where the agent bought the ducks and then arrested the vendor.

The entire episode hadn't taken up the whole morning, so he decided to repeat the act at the next town downriver. Again he found a youngster, and again he went into his act. But this boy wanted none of the "duck buying" business.

"Nosireee, the gubmint done set the hair on dem ducks."

The agent wheedled, "It ain't like I wanted to buy a lot of ducks. I just need a couple to keep my wife from getting suspicious."

The youngster seemed very embarrassed. He tried to break off the conversation, but the agent insisted that he be shown where to buy some ducks. Finally the boy looked up and said, "I know you, mister federal man, you're just trying to be slick!"

Lots of federal men were slick, all were smart and all were honest, to the best of my knowledge. They spearheaded law enforcement during the years which spelled the difference for the continent's flocks of waterfowl, the years during which public opinion swung slowly over to the side of the officer instead of the violator. The American goose hunter owes a lot to the old-time federal man and to his modern counterparts, both state and federal.

Missouri River Sandbar Geese

WATERFOWL migrating up the center of the nation seemed to favor that area where the South Dakota, Iowa, Minnesota, and Nebraska borders almost meet. Northbound geese followed the Big Muddy up to Elk Point, South Dakota, and then left the river to go straight north across South Dakota's lakes, North Dakota and on to Manitoba.

Illegally in the spring, legally in the fall, goose hunters lay in wait for the big birds on the sandbars of the Missouri River. There a few miles of boat travel would take you from Sioux City—my base of operations—through Iowa territory, through Nebraska waters and into South Dakota.

When I was stationed in Sioux City, I was fortunate to have some fine state officers to work with. Two of the best, Iowan Wayne Sanders and Nebraskan Gust Nun, went on to distinguish themselves as USGMA's for Uncle Sam. Bill Halliday, the South Dakota officer, was the dean of our crew. He'd been a warden almost all of his adult life, and had taken the job from his father. He knew his territory and his people as few officers ever did.

The first time I met Bill, in late March of 1955, I had been patrolling on the Big Sioux River, thirty miles north of his home. I blundered onto a young farm lad carrying an illegal Canada Goose and a shotgun. I took the goose as evidence, got the miscreant's signature on a statement admitting guilt, then released him. I told him that Bill Halliday would contact him and tell him when to appear in court. There was no reason to make a federal offense out of this violation.

That was about ten in the morning. I continued on my leisurely way, getting acquainted with the country. After sundown I drove into Elk Point. Bill greeted me and invited me in.

"Before I forget," I said, "where do you want this goose, which is evidence against one of your citizens who will have to be taken into state court soon?"

"Put it on the porch here," Bill replied. "The guy was fined thirty-five and costs, and the judge said to give the bird to charity. I'll deliver it in the morning."

"Wait a minute," I remonstrated, "I'm talking about a guy I caught this morning over on the Big Sioux—charges haven't been filed yet."

"Yeah, I know," Bill said, "but the pilgrim's conscience bothered him so bad that he called me up and told me about it. I sent him to the J.P., who hit him for the 35 and costs. No need for you or me to drive up there—it's all taken care of!"

He was telling the truth. I checked to make sure.

Bill was quick with smart cracks. Once when the waitress brought the check for our combined meals, I cracked, "Just give the check to my dad!"

Without hesitation, Bill replied, "And I'm not even married, so you know what that makes him!"

Bill was an expert at enforcement in the poorly defined boundary regions where Iowa, South Dakota and Nebraska merged on the Missouri. Every violator apprehended there claimed that he was in a different state than the one that had hired the warden. The ruse never worked, but they all tried it. Bill wanted to have the last laugh. He organized a patrol one hunting season, which went like this: Gust Nun, the Nebraska officer, rode in one boat with South Dakotan Halliday. Wayne Sanders, the Iowa officer, rode in the second boat with me—a federal officer.

We floated up to a sandbar blind to find one hunter with two ducks too many. Looking at the insignia on the boat, he grinned, "You can't touch me, Halliday. I ain't in South Dakota. I'm over the line."

Without changing expression, Halliday said, "I'd like you to meet Gust Nun, the Nebraska warden."

The smile disappeared momentarily. "I ain't in Nebraska; I'm in Iowa."

By now, Bill's smile was cherubic. "Then I'd like you to meet Mr. Wayne Sanders, the Iowa officer. And if you decide that you aren't in any one of the three states, then I'd like you to meet Mr. Cadieux, who is the federal officer. He don't give a damn which state you're in—you're still wronger'n a fluorescent duck decoy!"

Later on, Bill was doing the paperwork on another violator. The man, who was well known to Bill, was in a complaining mood. "Those chumps what set the seasons in Pierre don't know anything, setting a pheasant season that gave the West River guys 60 days and us only 28 days. I sure didn't get my share of pheasant hunting."

This got no reply, so he continued, "And that deer season they set was a joke. Give everything to the Black Hills hunters and forget we're even alive here in the southeast. I sure didn't get my share of deer hunting last fall."

Bill handed over a copy of the violation form. Very innocently he asked, "How many times did you go swimming in the Missouri this past year?"

"Swimming in the Missouri? You nuts? I never swim in the river."

"In that case," smiled Bill, "jump in. You didn't get your share of that, either."

When the spring thaw broke up the ice, the Missouri became a raging torrent, carving the river banks anew with huge chunks of ice—rearranging the geography so that we had a different river to hunt over every year. Sometimes those spring torrents brought down a motley collection of decoys, which had been left on sandbars the fall before.

Some of these were tire decoys. An arc was cut out of the body of the tire, becoming the body of the goose. A head and neck were sawed out of a 1-inch pine, and the whole works was painted flat white or flat gray to simulate Blues and Snows. From checking hunters, I knew they worked. I got a chance to hunt over them with Jake Gottlieb.

Jake stood six foot six in his waders, and weighed in at 290—about 40 pounds of which was fat. We floated over to a sandbar in his aluminum john boat, carrying guns and ammo, forty tire deeks, lunch and coffee and a double armful of dried cottonwood branches to make a rude blind. Butch, a bucket-headed Chesapeake Retriever, scorned the boat and swam alongside across 100 yards of swirling water to reach the bar.

We set the decoys facing into the northwest, which was also upriver. Cottonwood sticks with the leaves still hanging on were poked into the sand to form a blind. "Just enough to break our silhouettes," Jake instructed. It would have taken quite a few branches to mask his huge form, even when he was lying flat.

With everything arranged, Jake waded to the other bank and tethered the john boat. Then he waded back. "Even if they do spot the boat, it'll help us," he said. "They'll shy away from it and move closer."

Our first customers were a flight of Greenwinged Teal, which Jake disdained. "Not enough meat with the cost of shells what it is today!"

Next came a duo of Mallard hens. "Take them if you want to," Jake offered. I was slow getting up and dropped only one of the hens—out there a "fur piece" in the swirling current of deep water.

Butch stood up, almost yawning, and looked at Jake. "Fetch," and Butch trotted down to the downstream end of our bar, plunged into

the fast current and swam strongly to intercept the duck. Snapping it up, he reversed and vectored across the current back to the bank about 150 yards downstream. Without stopping to shake, he trotted up the bank to the quiet water and walked across to the blind. He dropped the duck, then shook heartily, spraying me thoroughly.

"Good dog you got there," I offered.

Jake looked pleased, but he said, "The bastard is too hard-headed to suit me."

About 9 o'clock Butch was staring to the south and we heard the distant honking of Whitefronts. Eleven geese were beating their way upriver against the light wind. Jake said, "I believe I can talk to those Specklebellies." He did, giving as good an imitation of the "toodle-oodle" high-pitched quaver of the Whitefront as I'd ever heard. The birds went on past, swung to the call and came in upwind, looking for a landing spot.

"Wait till they're over the bar," Jake whispered. I knew what he meant. It would be rough for the dog to retrieve geese dropped out in the current.

We jumped up and started shooting. I dropped two—one in the shallow water to the west of the bar, the other on the dry ground at the south end of the bar. Jake dropped two in the shallow water.

Butch raced into the water and started retrieving. He brought both of Jake's birds, dropping them alongside the hen Mallard. Without hesitating, he headed out for the bird I had dropped in the water. As he picked it up and started in, Jake was grinning broadly. "I'd rather eat Speckles than all the Canadas in the world," he said. "This calls for coffee. Whaddaya say?"

He was pouring coffee into the red plastic cups when Butch dropped the third bird with the others. He was blowing on the hot coffee when he saw that Butch was returning to his waiting position.

"What's the matter with you, you dumb bastard?" he yelled at the dog. "Can't you see that goose in plain sight there on the sandbar?"

Butch turned to look at the goose, but flopped down on the sand, one watchful eye on his oversized master.

"Oh-ho!" Jake bellowed. "So we're gonna be like that, eh?"

"Probably he can't see it," I suggested, although the goose was in plain sight less than fifty yards away.

"The stubborn bastard sees it all right," Jake snorted. He walked over and stood beside the dog, which rose to all fours, warily watching Jake. Giving the dog a line with his forward-swinging arm, Jake commanded, "Fetch!"

Looking back a quarter of a century later, I can still hardly believe what happened. With a savagery totally unanticipated, Butch leaped

132 for Jake's throat! Only the big parka saved Jake from that initial leap. Now, I've seen dogs being playful and sometimes playing rough. I've seen dogs bluffing, and they can be realistic. Butch was neither playing nor bluffing. He was trying his damndest to kill!

Knocking the dog away with a mighty sweep of his arm, Jake faced the second attack. Butch roared back, again leaping for the throat. He was met with a right uppercut from Jake's mitten-clad, ham-sized fist. The punch knocked the dog sideways. Before he could scramble to his feet, Jake dove on him. Swatting ferociously with his big mitts, Jake batted the dog's head, somehow avoiding the savage snap of those big jaws.

Grabbing a thick fold of hide on the scruff of Butch's neck, Jake slammed the dog repeatedly against the sand. Then he knelt on him. Whaling away with his free hand, Jake wore himself out on the dog, which finally stopped trying to get loose and lay still, absorbing fearful punishment.

Arm weary, Jake struggled to his feet, still holding onto the thick skin fold at the back of Butch's neck. Jerking the dog into the sitting position, Jake roared, "Sit!" Butch sat!

Jerking the dog ninety degrees to the right, Jake pointed him toward the dead goose. "Now, you sonofabitch," he yelled, "fetch!"

Butch took off at the dead run, scooped up the Whitefront on the gallop, returned it stylishly to the pile; then went back to his position and flopped down to watch the swirling river.

I had stood there motionless, my shotgun at the ready, all through the battle. I guess I had in mind to defend myself, if need be. "My God, Jake! What got into Butch?"

Jake waited till he quit puffing, took a sip of his coffee and looked at Butch with a tolerant grin. "'Bout once a year, me and him go to the mat," he said. "Got to show him who's boss, then he's okay for another year or so."

"I wouldn't keep a murderous bastard like that ten minutes," I said. But Jake answered, "Geese!" and dove for his blind. I got hidden in time to see a small bunch of Blues and Snows riding the wind down-river, making knots. They made a half-hearted turn toward our spread, so I put out my imitation of a lonesome Snow Goose. They circled, but the circle didn't get any smaller. "We better take 'em," Jake exclaimed. "They ain't coming closer!"

We fired a total of four shots. One loner slanted down, wing-tipped, but trying mightily to stay up with the flock. He lost altitude in a long, flailing glide across the current, slammed into the undercut clay bank and fell into the river. Once in the water, he righted himself and began to swim up against the current.

"Fetch." Butch showed his intelligence by running 100 yards upriver before plunging in. True to his proud Chesapeake Bay heritage, he swam with great strength, but the mighty Missouri was pushing him southward with greater force. He kept his eye on the goose, changing directions when it did. When the goose became aware of the dog, it turned to swim downstream.

Swept up with the fast current, dog and goose went out of sight around the next bend, and Jake splashed over for the john boat.

"He'll never get that one," I said.

"Let's see if we can give him a hand," Jake said. "That water is fast and cold—cold even for a Chesapeake!" We fired up the little outboard motor and sped down with the current, searching the water far ahead. We had gone more than a mile when I caught a movement of white out of the corner of my eye. There was Butch, walking north along the bank carrying a very much alive Snow Goose!

We maneuvered ashore, 100 yards upstream from the dog. Butch came up, dropped the goose in the boat and promptly grabbed it again as it tried to escape. Jake stuck his knife blade in the goose's head, killing it instantly. Butch shook himself dry, then climbed into the boat.

Heading back upriver, Jake yelled over the noise of the motor, "What was you saying about not keeping a dog like Butch around?"

A good retriever was a must if you hunted geese from the sandbars before the Corps of Engineers put a strait-jacket on the mighty river. But a dog wasn't always helpful!

There was the time that I floated down on three hunters fifty yards of shallow water away from the Iowa bank. Friendly guys, they showed me a fine pile of Canada Geese, one short of a three-gun limit. As I was getting ready to get back in my boat, their Black Labrador ran across the shallow water to the willows on the Iowa bank and returned with another goose!

"Well, where in hell did he find that?" asked one hunter with exaggerated innocence.

"Must have heard a cripple in the bresh, or smelt it," answered his buddy.

I had a pretty good idea how that Lab knew that there was a goose in the willows, so I said sharply, "Fetch!" The dog went back and fetched a second goose, which put them over the limit. I picked up their licenses and pocketed them before wading over to the goose storehouse on the bank. It held two more, a total of three geese too many.

Sometimes it doesn't pay to have a good dog—especially not if it will fetch for strangers!

Hunting Whitefronts with Coyotes

AS A STATE game warden in Mandan, I was informed about where the birds were, where they were feeding and how they could be best intercepted—all the knowledge that comes to state officers who are in the field ten hours per day, six or seven days a week. I knew that one flock of big honkers was frequenting the grainfields south of Fort Clark, flying off of Missouri River roosting areas.

I also knew that about 5000 Snows and a few Blues were on the wheat fields near Regan, over on the east side of the Big Muddy. I thought that these two flocks were about the only geese still sticking around in late November, at least within easy driving distance of my home in Mandan.

So it wasn't surprising that I was thinking more about deer than geese that evening as I drove down a river-bottom road north of Mandan. I was checking access roads which led into a known deer-shining area. I wanted to know if they'd been used or not, because I was coming out again later that evening to help patrol against deer shiners. Almost every game warden figures that a deer shiner is the lowest form of life—a rotten guy who shines a light into an animal's eyes to blind it, then hits it with a high-powered rifle. About 90 percent of the deer that fall to poachers seem to be does. Thus the law-abiding sportsman is deprived of two animals, the doe and its unborn fawn, part of next year's deer crop.

Noticing a place where car tracks veered off and ambled down into the cottonwoods, I parked my car at the side of the road and walked in to investigate.

The tracks led to four salt blocks, obviously placed for the use of the Herefords that fed in the river pasture. Satisfied that I had little to



Whitefronted Geese are also called "Specklebellies," and this photograph shows why.

136 worry about there, I retraced my steps. It was now dark, but I had no need for the flashlight on this brilliantly starlit night. There was no wind, a surprise in Dakota's November. I was enjoying the walk, and didn't hurry to get back behind the wheel.

That's when I heard the sounds of geese!

I stood still and listened intently until I pinpointed the source of those sounds. They came from a small, bare island of sand in the center of an old oxbow curve in the river. When the spring floods—this was before Garrison Dam was built—had taken a shortcut across the mouth of the oxbow, they had shortened the river considerably and left that spit of sand with two small cottonwoods snagged in its exact center.

The high bank was grown up with red willows, so it was easy to get close without any chance of spooking the birds. Moving slowly to minimize the noise, I got to the edge of the willows and peered out at the island. I couldn't see anything, but I could hear the contented sounds of a large number of geese. The surprise was that they sounded like Whitefronted Geese. We got lots more Canadas and Snow Geese than we did Whitefronts in those days. I listened to the soft music for half an hour, while I tried to plan strategy, but everything I heard sounded like Whitefronts.

I began to plan how I would reach those birds during legal shooting hours in the morning. No matter where I started my stalk, I always ended up at the edge of the red willows with 100 yards of ice and shallow water separating me from the island. No place on the perimeter would let me get closer than that. I considered my chances of making a mad dash across the 100 yards of open space to get within range before the birds got up flying speed. Knowing that Whitefronts are among the best fliers in the world of waterfowl, I considered that cardiac caper—but not for long. I knew it wouldn't work.

There had to be a better way.

If there was, I didn't find it, although I walked the entire perimeter looking for something that would allow me to sneak up closer.

With two neighboring officers I participated in a sweep of the bottomlands that night, working till 1 A.M. We found our part of the world completely law abiding. I got three hours of sleep, then tanked up on black coffee, loaded my shotgun into the car and headed for the horseshoe-bend oxbow. Again I prowled the perimeter, racking my brain searching for the answer. There wasn't a way, so I worked to the upwind end of the shoreline willows and hid, hoping that the birds would fly within range as they went out to feed.

They took their own sweet time that morning, making me wait till 9 o'clock before they began stirring around. I removed my right mitten

and put my hand inside my shirt to ready my trigger finger while the birds made a dozen abortive attempts to go out to feed. They talked nervously, walked around in circles, cocked their eyes toward the heavens. Individual birds hopped into the air, flew ten feet and landed again, obviously trying to stir up the enthusiasm of the others. Finally, after all the preliminaries, the entire flock took wing and flew upriver, not coming near me. At the nearest, they were still that lousy rotten 100 yards distant.

I wasn't the only hunter foiled by those Specklebellies that morning. As the birds disappeared to the north, a Coyote walked out on the ice of the oxbow. He had been hiding in the driftwood on the shore, looking for a chance to sneak up on that flock. If a Coyote hadn't been able to sneak across, how on earth could I?

During the day the wind began to pick up, blowing steadily from the northwest. I figured that the afternoon feeders would go out to the northwest, into the teeth of that fifteen-mile-an-hour wind. At 3:30 I was hidden in the north end of the willows on the west side of the oxbow, just about directly across from where I had been that morning. The Whitefronts preened themselves and dozed in the bright sunshine of their island retreat—just as safe as if they were in God's pajamas. The Coyote showed himself from time to time, stealing along in the willows on the downwind side.

"No use, fellow," I could have told him, "I already studied that side. No way you'll get within grabbing distance any more than I can get within shooting range."

At 4:30, the Whitefronts took to the air, without all the maneuvering they had done that morning. They did come closer than they had before—instead of 100 yards, they passed at about 99 yards range. They flew quartering across the wind, not directly into it, and their flight took them straight north again.

When the birds were all out of sight, I donned chest waders just in case and worked my way cautiously across the intervening ice and shallow water to the island. I spent ten minutes figuring out how to hide, finally deciding that I would simply lie down under the spectral white, sun-dried branches of the cottonwood which the spring flood had floated up there. It was scant cover, but the dead wood would break up my outline and the waders and parka were almost sand colored anyway.

There I lay until shooting time was legally over. Then, still not seeing any geese, I decided to get out of there so as not to risk spooking the birds when they did return. As long as I knew where they were roosting, I felt that I had a good chance to bag one. I knew that I could have waited another hour or so and then bagged a couple, but

138 there is one man who doesn't dare ever bend a game law—and that is the game warden.

Once in the car out of the wind, I used the thermos of coffee to start my motor again, then started the car to drive out. I rolled down the window as I went onto the river road, and there it was again—the night air was full of the sounds of well-fed geese.

I decided to forget about them that evening, and I got a good night's sleep without thinking about their seemingly impregnable roosting spot. But, for some unknown reason, the next morning found me working my way north, hoping to find the Whitefronts where they fed. I didn't find them, but as I meandered homeward just before sunset I saw the wavering vee's of a big bunch of geese off to the east. Speeding up, I zipped down section line roads, keeping the birds in sight. Where the road ends at the high bank overlooking the bottoms, I got out of the car and put the glasses on them. Sure enough, they were "my" Whitefronts, about 500 of them, and they were dropping into the oxbow island again. No chance to get to them tonight.

As I unloaded my gun and waders from my car in front of my home, Art drove by. That might not sound too momentous, unless you know Art Johnson—the dangedest goose hunter in the whole wide world. Not the most skilled, mind you—just the most dedicated and serious about it. Art would gladly trade his wife for a shot at a goose. He had bought all the decoys and calls ever made, and he had a garage full of equipment, every kind known to man. He also had tape recordings and phonograph records to teach him how to call. (They had failed to teach him. I'd heard him in action, and he sounded more like a gouty Peacock with an inflated libido than he did like a goose.)

Art was not a friend of mine, not even a real acquaintance. The only time we'd met was when I had picked him up with four geese too many one December morning the year before. Nobody in his right mind would have been out hunting geese on that subzero morning, but Art was never in his right mind when it came to geese. He had found the big birds hiding from a forty-mile wind under a cutbank on the Heart River fifty miles west of Mandan. With the temperature at -15° and the wind blowing, even a Canada is bothered by the weather. I have no doubt that he "ground-sluiced" those birds, but I also have no evidence that he did. Even if he had shot them on the ground, that's not against the law—it's just against the tenets of good sportsmanship.

I was just slamming the trunk lid when Art drove by. He stared at me. Stared and stared so that he almost hit the paper boy riding his bike around the next corner. He was still looking back at me when he

went out of sight. Having been lied to by saints and sinners, and fooled by experts, a game warden becomes pretty cynical after a while. I immediately got to wondering what Art was up to, now that I'd learned that my arrivals and departures were of such great interest to him.

At 4:30 in the morning, the alarm woke me to the howling of the wind around the eaves. It was blowing a full-fledged gale. I looked out the window at the tossing branches of the big elm and then went back to bed. Those geese were safe this morning, I thought, for I wasn't going out into that storm unless I had to.

But I had trouble getting back to sleep. My mind kept working out plans for getting close to those Whitefronts. Suddenly it dawned on me. With that wind howling out of the west, the birds would have moved down under the cutbank on the east side, right onto the ice—the only place where they'd be out of the wind. Just like the Canadas that Art Johnson got into, they'd be packed in there like sardines. There wouldn't be a bird left on lookout—they'd all be hunkered down as low as they could get.

In my mind's eye I could see myself bent over like a skulking Indian coming across the ice—which would be as hard and solid as the concrete highway by now—skulking across from the west side with that howling wind at my back. Ahead of me would be only 100 yards of ice, then 150 yards of frozen sand on top of the oxbow island and then—why I'd be right on top of them, looking them in the eye at point-blank range.

The picture was too tempting. I slid out of bed and started dressing. My wife said, "Do you have to go out on a morning like this?"

I felt only a slight pang of hypocrisy as I answered, "Morning like this is when the violators work, figgerin' that the warden is in out of the cold."

Carrying my parka and shotgun to the car, I noticed the parking lights of a car sitting across the street with the motor running. It was Art Johnson's car! That irritated me, but he did have a legal right to park where he pleased.

But when I made the fourth change of direction and turned north on the river road, Art was still with me. I sped up; he sped up. I slowed to five miles per hour; he slowed to stay behind. I resumed thirty-five miles per hour and he fell in behind. Rounding a bend, I suddenly braked to a stop and walked back to see what he thought he was doing.

"I gotta admit it, Chuck," he said with what he thought was an ingratiating grin, "I got a gut feeling that you're onto some geese and I'm cutting myself in on the action."

140 "Like hell you are," I told him. "I choose my own hunting partners."

"Right," he said, "but it ain't against the law for me to drive along behind you, now is it?"

Knowing how little time we had before dawn, I knew that I couldn't spare any to try to talk some sense into his head. With a disgusted snort, I got behind the wheel and drove sixty miles per hour to the parking place nearest the oxbow lake.

It took me a couple of minutes to shrug into my alpaca-lined pants and big parka. By the time I'd locked my vehicle, Art was standing beside me. "I'll do whatever you tell me to do," he said. "You're the guy who found them—but I'm going along."

Trying to make the best of a bad deal, I said, "C'mon, then, and shut up!"

When we approached the bottom of the horseshoe bend, I stopped to whisper, "You know this oxbow?"

"Know it like the back of my hand," he said.

"Good! The geese are on the island of sand in the center of the oxbow. You go away around and come up to the top end of the oxbow on the east side. I'll give you time to get into position. Then I'll leave the willows on the west side, walk across to the island without spooking the birds and . . ."

"I'm not trying to tell you how to hunt geese," he said, "but won't the birds see you when you try to cross the gut of the river?"

"No! They'll be down under the cutbank out of the wind, just like those Canadas were when you exceeded the limit a year ago." I couldn't see his expression, but he didn't say a word, just nodded and set out at a fast walk, going around the oxbow to the northeast end. I hoped he had enough sense to stay down in those willows, and not stick his head out for a good look.

According to my watch, it would be legal shooting time before I could make it all the way across the ice and the island and get within range of the Whitefronts. And I have to admit that I didn't give a damn whether or not Art was ready to shoot when I got into range.

The ice cracked underfoot as I set out across the open space, but these were the cracks of extreme cold, not the sounds of breaking ice. I kept my eyes fixed ahead as I shuffled along, sliding my feet to minimize the sounds of my travel. When I reached the sand, I paused to catch my breath and study the lay of the land. I couldn't hear any sound of geese—if they made any it was muffled by the sounds of the wind. If the birds hadn't already gone south, they ought to be behind the highest point of that bank.

As I was about to start walking again, I saw the other hunter. Not

Art, but the big Coyote, who was working his way slowly across the wind, homing in on the same geese that I sought. Without thinking, I started to raise the shotgun to shoot the Coyote, but I caught myself in time. I didn't want to spook the geese.

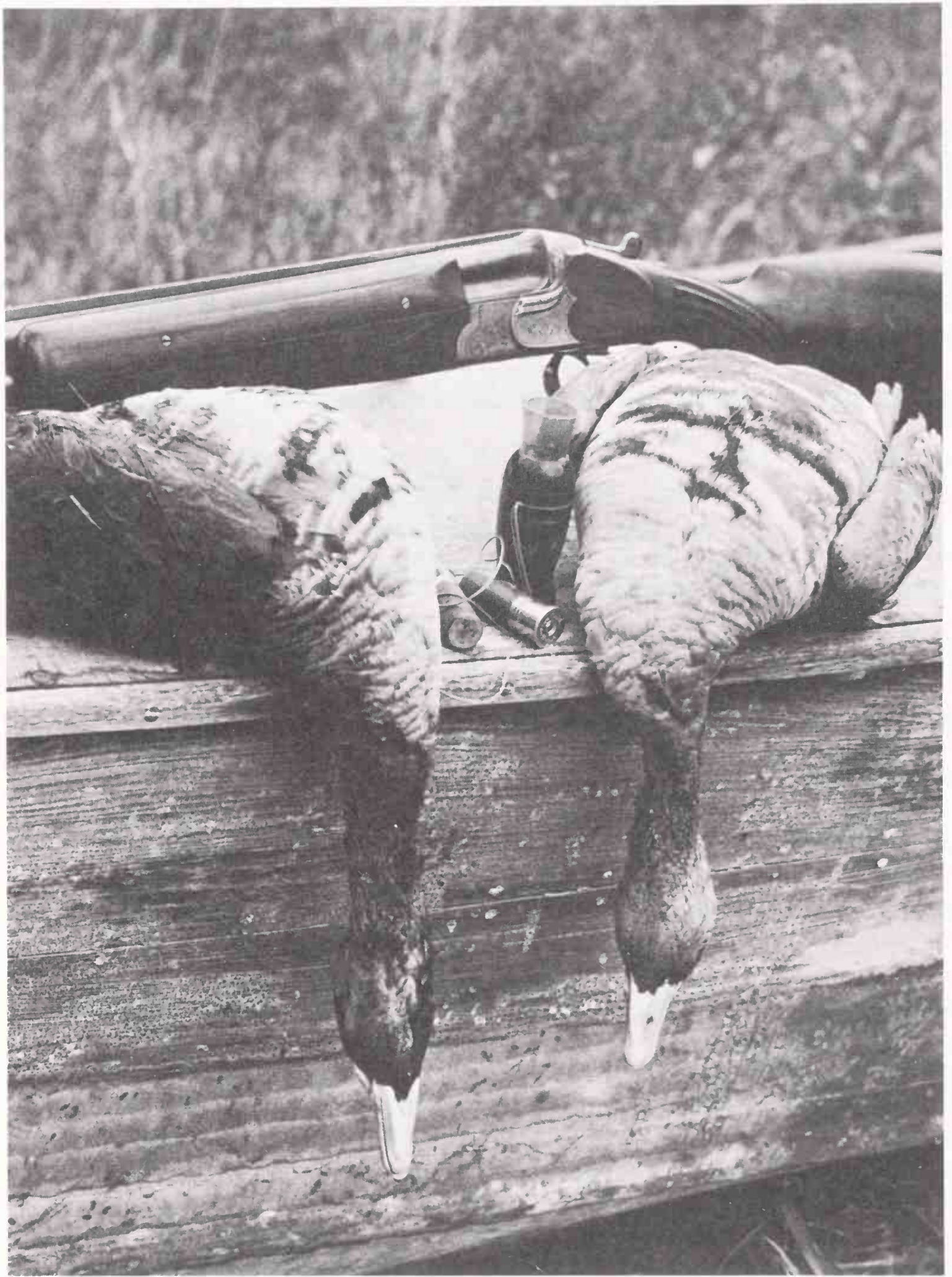
The Coyote was a big complicating factor, however, for I had to wait until he went out of sight behind the cutbank before I dared move onward to get within range. If I let him see me, he would run straight ahead, heading for the safety of the willows on the east bank—and that escape would surely flush the geese. After what seemed like an eternity, he went behind the bank and I hurried forward, running at a half-crouch. I headed for the highest point of the undercut bank, but before I got there, the geese exploded into frantic flight. They had been a little bit farther south than I had thought, and the Coyote had flushed them.

They were within range, but just barely. Swinging on the closest bird, I shot and watched him tip over in the air, recover, then go gliding off across the wind, one wing broken out near the tip. He flailed the air crazily, then came crashing to the ice out on the main channel of the Missouri. The flock got up into the wind, then fell off to the east, swinging with the wind to pick up flying speed. They were going right over Art!

Grinding my teeth with envy, I watched Art raise up and shoot twice. Two birds fell heavily. He swung the gun and aimed at a third, but thought better of it. After all, the limit was two and the game warden was watching.

I saw that my downed goose was walking along the ice, heading northwestward toward the west bank of the main river channel. I knew that I had to move fast. I started out to the west, going back the way I came until I hit a deer trail which headed northward through the willows. I wanted to intercept my goose before he got to the bank where he could easily hide. As I reached the willows, I thought again of the Coyote, wondering where he had gone. I had forgotten him entirely in the excitement of the shooting. I swung onto the deer trail and went dogtrotting north to intercept my walking goose. When I had gone at least 600 yards north, I broke through the willows to the bank and looked for him.

I got there in time to see the dog Coyote coming across the main stem of the river from the eastern bank, running to catch the goose, which still walked steadily north. That damned Coyote was going to get my goose unless I did something fast. I fired a shot at him, knowing he was out of range, but hoping that the sound of the shot would scare him off. He didn't even jump at the sound, so the wind must have muffled it or carried it past him unheard. I slid down over the



A pair of Whitefronted Geese.

bank, dropped eight feet to the solid ice and started running to get into the act.

The Coyote caught the goose, which had actually succeeded in getting airborne again for a short distance. The bird got five feet above the ice, then fell back. The Coyote took the bird by the neck and started dragging it toward the west bank. Suddenly he spotted me. He whirled around and stared, every hair on his body standing on end. Turning, he disappeared into the willows, leaving the goose on the ice, still alive.

After a comic-opera chase which saw me landing on my largest portion no less than three times, I finally was able to grab the goose's neck and put it out of its misery.

Art waited back at the cars with two fine Whitefronts. He was the happiest man I'd ever seen, and he couldn't stop his mouth from running over. "You're a true friend," he gushed. "You gave me the best place. You knew darned good and well that those geese would peel off with the wind and that I'd get the best shooting. You're a fine fellow, you're. . . ."

He tried to give me one of the geese, saying, "You did all the work and only got one long shot. I got two easy shots because of you. You earned the extra goose, not me."

I didn't want his damned goose and told him so.

"I really appreciate you're letting me come along," he was saying when I cut him short.

"Listen, Art, I let you come along because I didn't know how to stop you. If you want to thank me, just do me a favor—don't tell a soul that you hunted with me, okay?"

He wasn't the least bit offended. "If that's what you want, that's what I'll do," he said. "I'll never mention it to anyone. Do we try the same thing tomorrow morning again?"

Looking at the wind-blown snow scudding southward, I figured that the Whitefronts would be heading south. They probably were on their way right now. I said, "You can have them all to yourself tomorrow morning."

The Whitefront tasted great. We shredded the neck meat into the giblet gravy, so I didn't have to explain the bite marks on it. Even though I had to share the hunt with two Coyotes, it was one I'll always remember.

Home-Grown Honkers

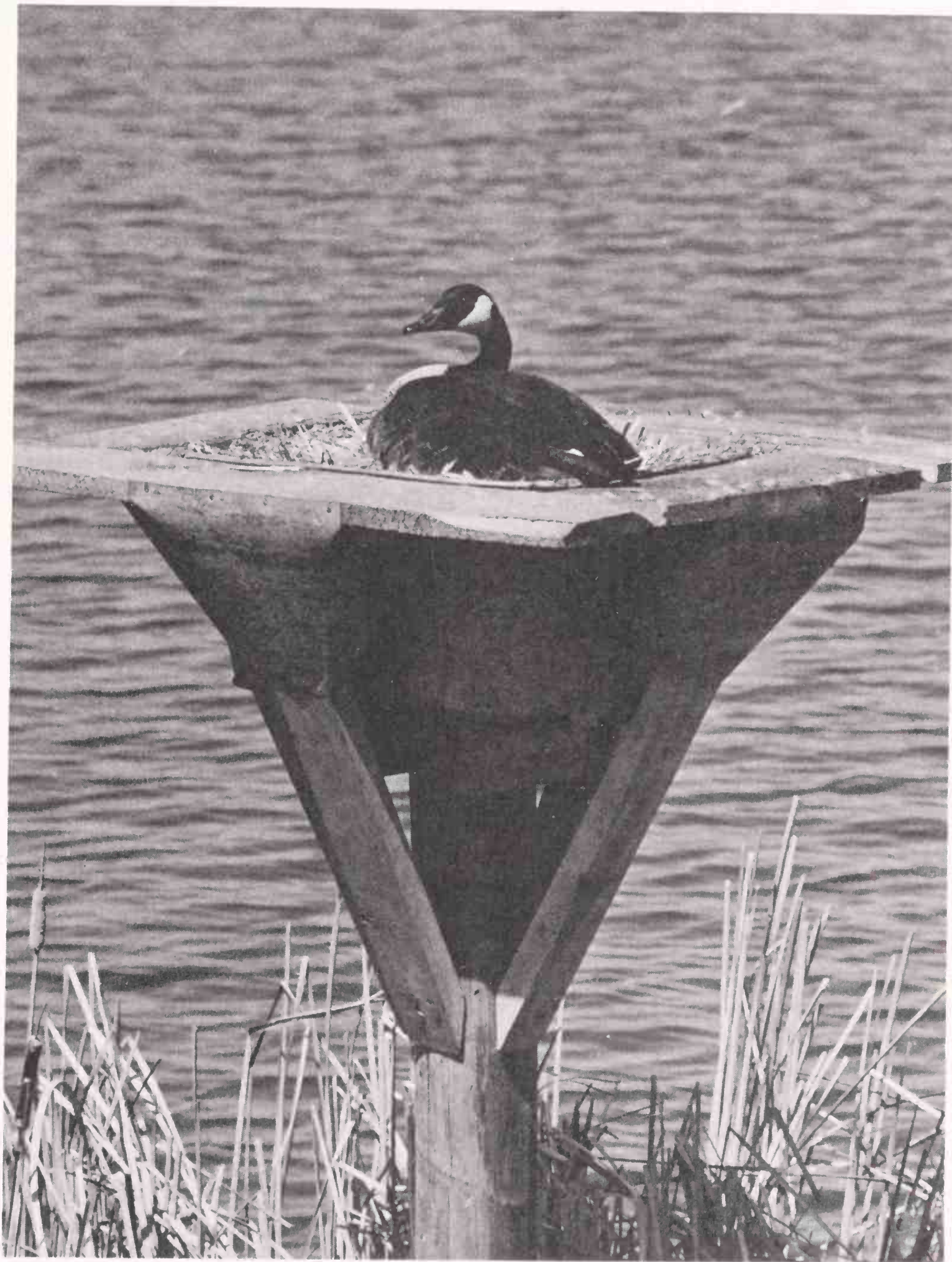
MOTORISTS zipping along Interstate 70 on the north side of the city of Denver encounter three lanes of cars going in each direction—a busy highway. Yet they often are startled by flocks of Canada Geese winging overhead at less than fifty feet altitude!

The first time that happened to me was in late August, much too early for the migrating flocks to have worked their way down so far. These geese didn't have to migrate. They were hatched right there in Denver County, in the midst of a million people!

Colorado is one of many states which have tried to reintroduce nesting flocks into their historic ranges. Their story is most interesting, so let's take a look.

There were only a few nesting Canadas in Colorado in the late 1950's. A small colony existed in the mountain valleys in the northwestern corner of the state. In that area, isolation from people and protection by local ranchers enabled the birds to hang onto their ancestral nesting habitat while the European flood engulfed Colorado on the way West. There were also a few breeders in the Denver Mountain Parks—one of the most extensive city park systems in the nation. But there was little chance that either of these flocks would be able to enlarge, given their limited habitat for nesting.

In 1956, Jack Grieb was a waterfowl biologist for the Colorado Division of Wildlife. Now he is the Director of the division. His idea of trying to reestablish nesting flocks in their historic breeding range was given good backing by the Directors of the division and by the ranchers of Colorado—without whose cooperation the project would have been doomed. It was Jack's idea, but a lot of the credit has to be given to Gurney L. Crawford, a wildlife conservation officer and biologist. Crawford got the job done, dealing with landowners and with reservoir-operating companies, whose cooperation was also essential. Among the Directors who gave the project their support were Tom Kimball, who has been the Executive Vice President of the National



Artificial nesting sites, which were relatively safe from predators, were an important part of Colorado's restoration program.

Chapter Sixteen

146 Wildlife Federation for many years; and Harry R. Woodward, who was Director of the South Dakota Department before coming to Colorado, and who has spent a large part of his life in migratory waterfowl work.

To start a captive breeding flock, you need some geese—preferably half male and half female. The Coloradoans got permission from Dan and Virgie Gallagher to steal goose eggs from their ranch at Bowles Lake. They also begged goslings from the Denver city parks. Then they went looking for more—and their search took them to my home town. They bought Canada Geese from Carl Strutz in Jamestown, North Dakota. Now they had the nucleus of a captive flock, which they placed at Bonny Reservoir.

In the first five years of their program, they released 274 geese into promising nesting spots along the foothills of the Rocky Mountains north of Denver. Fifty-two of these birds came from the Bonny Reservoir Flock and the remaining 222 came from the Denver area. The Bonny Reservoir Flock was made up of the Carl Strutz birds and wild geese taken on the Bowdoin National Wildlife Refuge near Malta, Montana. Both sources of supply provided the big Canadas, the ones the taxonomist “splitters” call *Branta canadensis moffitti* or *Branta canadensis maxima*, which—you guessed it—translates into Big Canada Goose.

The first releases went to the College Lake area, near Fort Collins. The lake is on property owned by Colorado State University. For the first few years it was possible to keep an open-water area for the small flock—even in the Colorado winter—by using a small tank heater. In 1959, however, the heater couldn't cope with the cold, and the lake froze over. The flock moved to a nearby reservoir which was kept open by a large number of wintering ducks. After finding that the tank heater couldn't cut the mustard, the department installed an Air-Aqua system which used bubbles of air, coming from compressed-air pipes on the bottom of the lake, to keep open an area 150 by 30 feet. This system sufficed until 1971.

A four-square-mile area around College Lake was closed to all hunting, trapping and fishing, to minimize human harassment of the birds. But it wasn't humans that caused failures in the first few years. Raccoon and red fox predation threatened many of the nests, so a predator control program using poisons and steel traps was begun. This predator control program, a necessary and useful tool of sound wildlife management, is still used when it is needed.

In addition to the predator control program, nesting success was increased by the building of artificial nesting structures, which gave the honkers the chance to nest safely out of the reach of mammalian

predators. In a 1969 study, it was found that elevated nests had a success percentage of 74.7 percent, while ground nesters were only 54.5 percent successful.

In 1959, as the expanding flocks required new nesting areas, the area closed to hunting was extended to include 175 square miles. College Lake was proving that the project could succeed, so the Colorado department began to distribute their nesting flocks. In the Fort Collins–Loveland area, surveys told the following story: In 1958 there were 3 nests; in 1962 there were 23 nests; in 1966 there were 106 nests; and in 1968 the number of nests reached 268—by actual count.

In the Boulder–Longmont area, the program was only a couple of years behind. There were 85 nests in 1963 and 300 nests in 1965—most of them at Valmont Reservoir. Valmont became an important nesting site when fences were erected on the long dikes and levees to put a stop to predation by feral dogs. It is worth noticing that this goose population was increasing by leaps and bounds at the same time that the human occupants of the same area were becoming much more numerous. From 1962 to 1975, Larimer and Boulder Counties doubled their human population—but the goose population built even faster.

The birds were very adaptable to human encroachment. They seemed to know that they were welcome in the middle of the big city; they visited the city parks often. In addition, they spread their nesting territory over much of the foothills area north of Denver and, to a lesser extent, into the flat country to the east. Biologist Szymczak earned his Master's Degree in Wildlife Management studying the Foothills Flock of Canada Geese. One of the interesting results he found was the 71 percent nesting success in the metropolitan Denver area in 1967. This compared well with Missouri's 65 percent, Illinois' 57 percent and Manitoba's 45 percent—all data from free-flying flocks of Canadas.

The burgeoning flock of resident Canada Geese in the Denver foothills area served as decoys to attract Canadas which normally migrated through this area. In particular, the geese comprising the Hi-Line Flock from the Saskatchewan breeding areas changed their migration path considerably. Formerly they had continued south to winter in the Middle Rio Grande Valley in New Mexico. Seeing thousands of contented Canadas wintering in Colorado, these birds evidently decided "They know something we don't know." So they tried out the Colorado winter, and they liked it.

Census figures of wintering Canadas on the Bosque del Apache National Wildlife Refuge in the southern half of New Mexico's Rio Grande Valley show a dramatic drop in numbers, coinciding with the



Jack Grieb takes eggs from low-lying nests that would be flooded out, at the beginning of Colorado's very successful restoration project. Eggs are packed in cotton batting and carried in an ice chest to maintain a warm temperature en route to the incubator.

dramatic rise in numbers of Canadas wintering in the Denver foothills area. Shortstopping was in action.

What did all of this mean for the Colorado goose hunter? Before the introduction of nesting flocks, the Canada Goose kill in this area averaged 1041 birds per year. By 1973, the area's kill had risen ten-fold, to 10,581 birds per year. In 1976, Colorado's total Canada kill was up to 32,620, and a very sizable part of this good news was due to the Foothills Nesting Flocks.

In 1978, Colorado biologists estimate that there were 4000 breeders in the foothills area, a very sizable part of the Hi-Line Flock. In the first twenty years of the project, the Foothills Flock has produced 2200 goslings, who were moved to other areas of eastern Colorado and even to other states. Despite burgeoning human populations, Operation Home-Grown Honker has increased hunting success and has provided nursery stock for other areas, each of which has a potential to repeat the success story.

Are there any drawbacks? Well, the goose hunters in New Mexico felt somewhat shortchanged, because the Coloradoans have shortstopped their wintering population of Canada Geese, greatly reducing the number available in the Land of Enchantment. However, there never were a great number of dedicated goose hunters in New Mexico. Goose habitat was very limited in the nation's fifth largest state, and the New Mexican goose hunter group was distinguished by quality rather than quantity. This select group included some of the most skilled hunters and callers in the nation. Although they were few in number, they seemed to make out quite well without the Hi-Line Flock, which had been lured into enduring the Colorado winters by the blandishments of the Foothills Flock.

That Foothills Flock seems to be almost entirely a non-migratory flock. They are hatched in Colorado, they winter in Colorado and in their turn they breed and nest in Colorado. This stay-at-home trait is borne out by the first fifty leg bands returned by hunters: 43 banded geese were killed in Colorado, 2 in Wyoming and no other state had more than 1!

Can the same thing be done in your state? A lot of questions must be answered first. Is your area within the historic breeding range of the Canada Goose? If it is too far south, your chances are slim or nonexistent. Can you provide sanctuaries which are absolutely undisturbed during the nesting season, as well as complete protection from hunting during the birds' first three or four years? It's essential that the birds not be driven out of their home territory by gun pressure. Can you guarantee wholehearted cooperation from landowners? Without that cooperation, the project is doomed from the start.



Gurney Crawford, an important part of the Colorado restoration project, lifts a bantam hen off goose eggs. Despite the size disparity, the banties did a good job of incubating and hatching the big Canada eggs.

Do you have the legal ways and means to control predation by feral dogs, raccoons, foxes, coyotes and skunks? Without the ability to control predation in the formative years of the nesting flock you might as well give up. You can't afford to feed your geese to the skunks and foxes.

Before you decide whether or not such a program would work in your state, let's take a look at how a few other states fared with their attempts.

MISSOURI

The Missouri Department of Conservation wanted to bring back the big Canadas as local nesters in that state—and with reason. Missouri was within the historic nesting area of that glamor species. They decided to try to reestablish the nesters in the Tri-Lakes Area, with an initial goal of about 1000 nesters. In 1970, they established a nesting flock of Big Canadas in the Trimble Wildlife Area near Kansas City. The birds were placed on elevated nesting tubs in a small swamp (common washtubs work very nicely). Goslings from this Trimble experiment were brought to the Drury Wildlife Management Area, while they were still too young to fly.

Monty Burch was the manager at Drury. He placed his birds, 100 of them, in open pens in 1971. They grew, matured, learned to fly away—but they came back. About the same number of birds were released in the same manner in each of the next two years. Now, there are about 600 of the big birds nesting and living in the Taneycomo, Bull Shoals and Table Rock Areas. These birds are all free to migrate as far as they like, but they have remained in an area about fifty miles in radius, centering on the Drury Area. The Missouri Conservation Commission closed the season on the taking of all geese in four counties to protect the big ones. However, many of the flock strayed into Arkansas, where there was no closed season on geese. Many of them were killed there.

Since 1975, Monty Burch has been catching flightless goslings and sending them to other areas of the state in an attempt to spread the flock over a bigger breeding area. His efforts have borne fruit at Schell, Osage, Montrose, the Busch Area near St. Louis and at Duck Creek.

Missouri is finding a lot of problems in establishing the *maxima* strain of Canada. In the first place, food and habitat for these birds in Missouri is severely limited. The Ozarks offer more forested hillsides

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152 and more deep lakes than would be considered optimal for goose production—which favors grassy hills and wide, shallow pothole country.

One of the most surprising obstacles has been the attitude of the local people in some parts of the Tri-Lakes Area. Not that they dislike the birds; on the contrary, they are loving them to death. In fact, they are taming the wild birds much faster than the birds can become acclimated to the wild—especially at Taneycomo. Here the long, narrow lake is almost completely encircled by wall-to-wall human development. Living on this lake, a goose is never more than 200 yards from human dwellings—and friendly people who feed him. A goose that is accustomed to taking scraps of bread from the hands of a little old lady in a lakeshore cottage is not a good candidate for the school of survival.

What can be done about this situation? Very little, actually. The State Department is not foolish enough to enact legislation which would punish a grandmother for feeding a goose. And the idea of holding a shotgun hunting season on a little lake like Taneycomo has overtones of raising the birds for slaughter. Anyone who ventured onto Taneycomo, shotgun in hand, would face the ire of the people who live there and enjoy the geese.

Missouri isn't sure just yet how their experiment will turn out. There are too many geese on Lake Taneycomo now, with more on the way, and no chance of hunting them as long as they stay at home. But despite the problems, the Missourians have established another gene pool of *Branta canadensis maxima*, which makes the sub-species that much safer from the threat of extinction.

NORTH DAKOTA

Still another success story is building in North Dakota, where the State Game and Fish Department has been in the business of extending the nesting area of *Branta canadensis maxima*. Chuck Schroeder, who heads waterfowl work here, told me that the state had gotten into the business in 1972—considerably later than the Fish and Wildlife Service experiments. At first the geese were released only on the Slade National Wildlife Refuge in Kidder County; then releases were expanded to take in many parts of the Prairie State. Through 1978, the department has released 5107 geese. Some of these goslings were from the Carl Strutz strain of Canadas, produced in my hometown of Jamestown, North Dakota.

Some of the releases were of young birds—"the young of the year."

The state also tried releasing yearlings, birds which had been “over-wintered” in captivity before release. Then they tried holding the birds till they were two year olds and releasing them as wing-clipped birds, incapable of flight until the next moult brought back their flight feathers. Schroeder feels that it is worth the effort and expense to keep the goslings until they become yearlings, but that he has passed the point of diminishing returns if he holds them for more than one year after hatching.

Biologist Forrest Lee, of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, did the necessary measurements on the North Dakota stock, and the results show that they can all be classified as the “giant” strain of Canadas.

Schroeder says that the Game and Fish Department will phase out of the hand-rearing program in 1980—because they now have at least 500 nesting pairs. Replacement stock that may be needed in certain areas will come from wild-trapped birds. In addition to the 500 nesting pairs resulting from the state program, Schroeder says that there are probably more than 1000 goslings produced annually on the Audubon NWR; J. Clark Salyer NWR is producing about 550 young per year; Upper Souris NWR production is estimated at about 500 goslings also, and Lostwood NWR adds another 200 to 300 young.

Unlike the Foothills Flock in Colorado, the North Dakota flocks all migrate. It gets very cold in North Dakota in the wintertime. Most of the flocks migrate almost straight south, according to early band returns. Some of them winter in South Dakota, some at McConaughy Reservoir in Nebraska, some travel to the Platte River, some to Kirwin NWR in Kansas, to Cheyenne Bottoms and even into Texas. Some of the birds from the westernmost plants have wintered in eastern Colorado. Some home-grown honkers from central North Dakota go to Missouri, spending the cold months at Squaw Creek NWR.

Information as to where the Dakota flocks winter comes not only from numbered aluminum leg bands, but also from colored collars—with identifying numbers—which allow biologists to gather data while the bird is still alive. These are described in more detail in the next chapter.

This program is of great importance to goose hunters all down the Flyway. North Dakota is replacing the biggest Canadas, and North Dakota—despite a tremendous loss of potholes due to drainage—still possesses one of the greatest nesting area potentials of any state.

In the home-grown honker business, state and federal waterfowl managers are succeeding in reestablishing numbers of local breeding geese in areas which have been without them for decades. Schroeder says that the last known instance of a giant-strain Canada nesting in North Dakota was in 1925—near Dawson, in Kidder County.

Geese nest there again today. It's nice to be able to roll back time.

About Goose Banding

THE LIGHT aluminum bands placed around the legs of migratory waterfowl bear an inscription asking the finder to inform the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service of the fact that he has recovered that band. The band also carries a number which was recorded at the time of banding, along with details of location, age, species and sex. The records are kept in big computers at Patuxent, Maryland.

When you report a band recovery, the scientists at the Migratory Bird Population Center connect the dot on the map where the bird was banded with the dot on the map where you shot it. These are their most important clues to delineating migration paths.

The band causes no hardship to its wearer. The tales these individual bands could tell would be fascinating if we had some way to learn more than the bare facts—the bird was banded there and it was recovered here.

Bands have produced most of our information about the migration of birds. Every year, we find bands placed on white geese by the Russians, proving that some of our California hunting was “Made in the Soviet Union.” We get Bluewing Teal band returns from Colombia and Peru—bands that were put on newly hatched ducklings just two and a half months before. A 3000-mile flight for a ten-week-old bird! We get Snow Goose bands returned from Texas—bands that had been placed in Canada five days before. They must have traveled with the jet set!

Band returns tell us that some wild geese live to be fourteen years old, but the same computers tell us it is a mighty lucky goose that lives to be four years old—mighty lucky.

In addition to the numbered aluminum leg bands, there have been many other systems used to mark individual birds so that their migrations could be more accurately checked. Frustrated by the fact that they get data only from dead ducks and dead geese, biologists have devised numbered and brightly colored plastic and naugahyde col-

lars, which can be read at a distance from the live bird, if you use binoculars or a spotting scope. In some experiments, banded Snow Geese have been spray-painted bright pink so that they can be followed down the Flyway. I hope one never comes to my decoys—I'm not sure I could stand the shock.

Not all of these methods work. Obviously, the spray paint lasts only until the next moulting period. Other systems fail for mechanical reasons. In 1956, biologists in a northern state placed a big naugahyde saddle on the back of trapped geese. The fluorescent orange saddle and six-inch letters were planned to make it possible to read their data, even from an airplane. But farmers and hunters brought in two birds that had gotten themselves so entangled in the "foolproof" harness that they couldn't fly. One bird had starved to death, the other was very gaunt and weak. That was the end of that setup.

These are wild birds we are talking about, birds which have a natural wariness and a natural fear of man. How do we get close



These bands were placed on Snow Geese breeding in Soviet Russia and removed by hunters who shot the birds in California.

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156 enough to put the band on? The first time I tried to band a goose, I asked that same question—both before and after the attempt!

I was part of a drive-trap crew banding ducks on the Saskatchewan prairie. A drive-trap crew gets its flightless young birds and some of the flighted hens, too, by setting up wing walls of nylon or wire mesh, strung on steel rods pushed into the muck of a swamp or slough. These wing walls funnel the driven ducks into a trap which is easy for the ducks to enter, but difficult for them to leave. Walking slowly, the crew herds the birds ahead of them. By working slowly, they can move the birds along without alarming them until they strike the retaining walls. The birds swim along the walls, looking for a way around. The only way around is into the door of the trap. I've been on drives which have trapped 600 ducks, and on more than one drive we've bagged not one. When we met deep water, we used canoes to haze the birds across into the shallows where the trap was set up.

At the north edge of our assigned banding area, we came to a deepwater lake, whose clear waters were home to three broods of very young goslings, along with their majestic parents. Each adult pair escorted a brood which steamed in "line of battle" formation between them. Our supervisor said, "Go ahead and band those geese, that's what the big bands are for!"

We were Civil Service Grade Sevens; he was a Nine. So we asked, "Yeah, but how?"

He replied, "Chase them with the canoes. Make the young ones dive. Then keep right after them, force them to dive again as fast as they come up—without giving them a chance to catch their breath or rest. They'll tire out quickly; then dip them up with the big landing nets."

It sounded simple enough.

Our fleet set sail on the lovely lake, two bright red canoes each manned by two husky men. Both men had paddles and knew how to use them. One man in each boat also carried a long-handled dip net—the kind you use to land a big walleye.

Warily, the adult Canadas moved off, sounding soft warning notes which probably translated into, "Follow me; those chumps can't catch you."

We launched a direct frontal attack, and the brood scattered in panic. But the adults charged us right back, wings raised in threatening position, long necks extended toward us they alternately hissed imprecations and honked loudly. Refusing to be intimidated, we fought off their charge with upraised paddles, then picked one gosling and went for it. "Divide and conquer" was our battle cry.

Paddling swiftly, we overtook the young gosling; it dove. We could see it for the first four feet or so underwater, enough to be able to anticipate its direction and surfacing point with some accuracy. We tried to be there and waiting with the net when it came up. Five times we chased, five times it dove. I yelled, "Stick to it, Bob, he's getting pooped!" Another six dives and Bob gasped, "I'm getting pooped, let's take a rest!"

"Don't let him rest," I yelled back. With great advance planning, I was now holding the net, ready to scoop up the exhausted bird; Bob was doing the paddling. He spun the canoe again and again, and the gosling dove and dove. Finally, realizing that Bob was not physically competent to handle the canoe, I paddled while he got ready to scoop up the bird, which we were sure must by now be nearing exhaustion. After all, I had tired it quite a bit. But the damned bird dove and dove and dove and dove again. Finally, two exhausted men rested on their paddles and wiped the sweat from their beet-red faces. The gosling sedately picked at some floating duckweed as it rejoined its siblings.

The other canoe, paddled by men ten years younger than we were, finally did tire one gosling enough to get it in their net. But after they banded it and released it, it promptly turned belly up and died from overexertion. We gave up. There had to be a better way.

There was. One year later, we joined forces with other drive-trap crews to band geese on a very large shallow lake. We were able to slowly maneuver the birds ahead of us until they were in the shallows with a lot of emergent vegetation. The vegetation gave them a sense of security, and they moved slowly ahead of the long, loud line of drivers. The drive crossed deep water with three boats and two canoes; then the boatmen debarked and waded the rest of the way, joining sixteen other hipboot-clad men who pushed the geese—flightless young and moulting adults alike—ahead of them, down the wing walls and into the trap. The trap was a huge affair of hoops and nylon fishnets attached to the back of a regular duck trap. We banded 177 out of 178 Canadas found in the trap that day. One was crushed in the pack and suffocated. But it did prove that there was a better way than chasing them.

On the tundra of northern Canada, Canadian Snow Goose biologists have found that the white birds are singularly "guide-able," as long as you walk past them, rather than directly at them. These geese are colony nesters, and it is simple to find as many as a hundred flightless young in one place. Seven biologists start out in single file, fifty feet apart, walking past the geese. They slowly alter their course,

158 always to the left, and go on "passing by" the geese. But their circle is slowly decreasing in size, slowly packing the young Snow Geese together.

After they have made enough circles, they have the geese "penned" among them. Then comes the genius of the idea. One man turns his back and starts walking away—heading for the banding pen. The others all turn and start walking toward the geese. It's all done very slowly. The only way for the geese to stay away from the men approaching them is to follow the man who walks away. He leads them into the enclosure, the door shuts behind them, the clip boards and banding pliers come out and the work begins.

There are other times when we wish to trap and leg-band flighted birds on migration stopovers or on their wintering grounds. There are no flightless young on these areas, nor are the birds moulting on the southern end of their annual pendulum swing. How do you get your hands on them to band them?

Some ingenious traps have succeeded in luring the birds along a trail of corn kernels into a roofed-over trap. But geese are very reluctant to go under anything, even a roof of chickenwire. The need was for a trap which could extend itself over the birds before they had a chance to fly. That meant that the trap had to move fast, almost as if it were shot from a gun.

So a trap was devised which was shot out of a gun. The cannon-net trap is a huge section of light cloth mesh, usually with four- to six-inch openings. After bait has been put out to accustom the flock to a particular spot, the net is carefully folded—accordion-style—on top of itself along one edge of the baited area. The bottom edge of the net is tied to heavy stakes, right down at ground level. To the front edge of the net are tied six-foot lengths of strong innertube rubber. The other end of the rubber is attached to heavy metal weights which are used as projectiles. In some cases, the piston of a small import engine is used. The piston is loaded into a cast-iron pipe driven into the ground at right angles to serve as a mortar. The pipe becomes the cannon; the piston is the projectile. The powder to propel the projectile is furnished by shotgun shells with the shot taken out. Projectile cannons are placed at intervals along the edge of the cannon net, the detonating wires are connected and you are ready.

Then you wait.

When a sufficient number of birds are on the bait, the cannons are fired. The pistons sail out in a short arc over the geese, dragging the net out with them. When they reach the end of their rope, the elasticity of the innertube inserts keeps the projectiles from rebounding back upon themselves. The pistons fall beyond the flock and the en-



The cannon net fell over a portion of this flock of Canadas, holding them unharmed for the bander.

160 tire net wafts to earth as lightly as a piece of thistle down in August.

Now it remains for one or two men to pick up the birds and remove them from the net, another to sex and age the birds, a third to apply the bands and a fourth to record the data.

Great numbers of waterfowl were banded at Lake Andes National Wildlife Refuge in South Dakota during the late 1950's, mainly through the tireless efforts of a waterfowl biologist named Leo Kirsch. He was known as the Duke of Duckdom, or something like that—I never did get it right. I was stationed in Sioux City, Iowa, where I had the privilege of working with Iowa officer Wayne Sanders and Nebraska officer Gust Nun, both of whom later joined the Fish and Wildlife Service. One Saturday just before Christmas, we decided to take a busman's holiday and drive up to Lake Andes to see the wintering waterfowl. I introduced the two state officers to Leo Kirsch, who enthusiastically described his latest project. He was fluoroscoping live ducks and geese, captured by cannon-netting, to see how many carried lead—either ingested or lead shot into their carcasses. We wanted to see how it worked.

Because Christmas was near, Leo had dismissed his crew so that they could spend the holiday with their families. He said he would fire the cannon net, if we three would help him fluoroscope and band the birds. We volunteered, and before we could change our minds, Leo fired the net. The projectiles soared out gracefully, the net flew out and settled over a huge flock of ducks and geese. There was a vast multitude of birds to work. It was near two in the afternoon and we had our work cut out for us.

Cracking orders like a drill sergeant, Leo set up an assembly line. Wayne caught the bird and handed it to me. I was in a seated position so that I could hold the bird while I determined its sex by inverting the vent and searching for the penis. Gust recorded the data, placed the waterfowl into a plywood box put together only with glue and slid the box through an opening into the darkened interior where Leo operated the fluoroscope. Checking the "X-ray" for signs of lead, Leo pushed the box on through and out the other side. It fell two feet to the ground and the lid fell off. The bird then flew away and we repeated the whole operation as fast as we could.

When the fluoroscope found lead, Leo called us in to take a look. Lead shot showed up as round black dots on the grays and whites of the picture. We found Mallards with as many as six shot pellets in their gizzards and one goose which carried a .38 caliber bullet right in the joint of her leg. It didn't seem to bother her locomotion; in fact, it gave her a seductive wiggle that probably drove the ganders wild.



Technicians of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service band a Canada Goose from the wintering flock at Blackwater National Wildlife Refuge in Maryland.

162 Wayne got a bright idea. Without saying anything, he showed me that he was placing a $\frac{3}{8}$ -inch drill bit, about 4 inches long, between the wing and the body of a Mallard. I held it so the bit wouldn't fall out and placed the bright greenheaded drake in the fluoroscope. When that showed on the screen, Leo let out a roar. "Hey, come look at what this bird is carrying." We all looked, and then Leo caught on. But it was a good laugh. We replaced the drill bit on the stand and the duck left in a hurry.

After 5 o'clock we got pretty tired of it. But there were lots of birds left. The geese were all very healthy, with no sign of constipation, due to their diet of winter wheat greens and yellow corn. As Wayne put each goose on my lap, the bird seemed overcome by the honor being shown it and lost control of its anal orifice, resulting in a green and white gift that landed in my lap. After forty or fifty geese so honor you, it soaks through your winter underwear. You try to ignore it, but it doesn't go away!

A young lad who lived nearby came over to watch—as he often had before—and we told him about the drill-bit caper. He had a better idea. Taking a Mallard, he put his own expansion-band wristwatch around the bird's neck, over one wing so that it couldn't fall off. Grinning widely, he inserted the Mallard in the box and slid it into the shed, then hustled to the other side to catch the box and retrieve his watch when it came through.

Leo was also getting tired. When the duck with the wristwatch showed up on his screen, Leo said only, "Cut it out, you guys, we got work to do." But he shoved the box *back* out of the shed, instead of sending it through to be retrieved by the owner of the watch. The box hit me on the knee, the lid popped off and the Mallard flew off into the sunset, wearing a self-winding Timex. If John Cameron Swazey ever recovers that one, he'll have a story to tell.

Long after dark we finished the big job. We were cold and tired and hungry. I was also filthy. It was my car, so I drove. Wayne and Gust rode in back to stay as far away from me as possible. We banded a lot of geese, but in another sense, the geese got it all over me that day.

Philosophical Questions About Goose Management

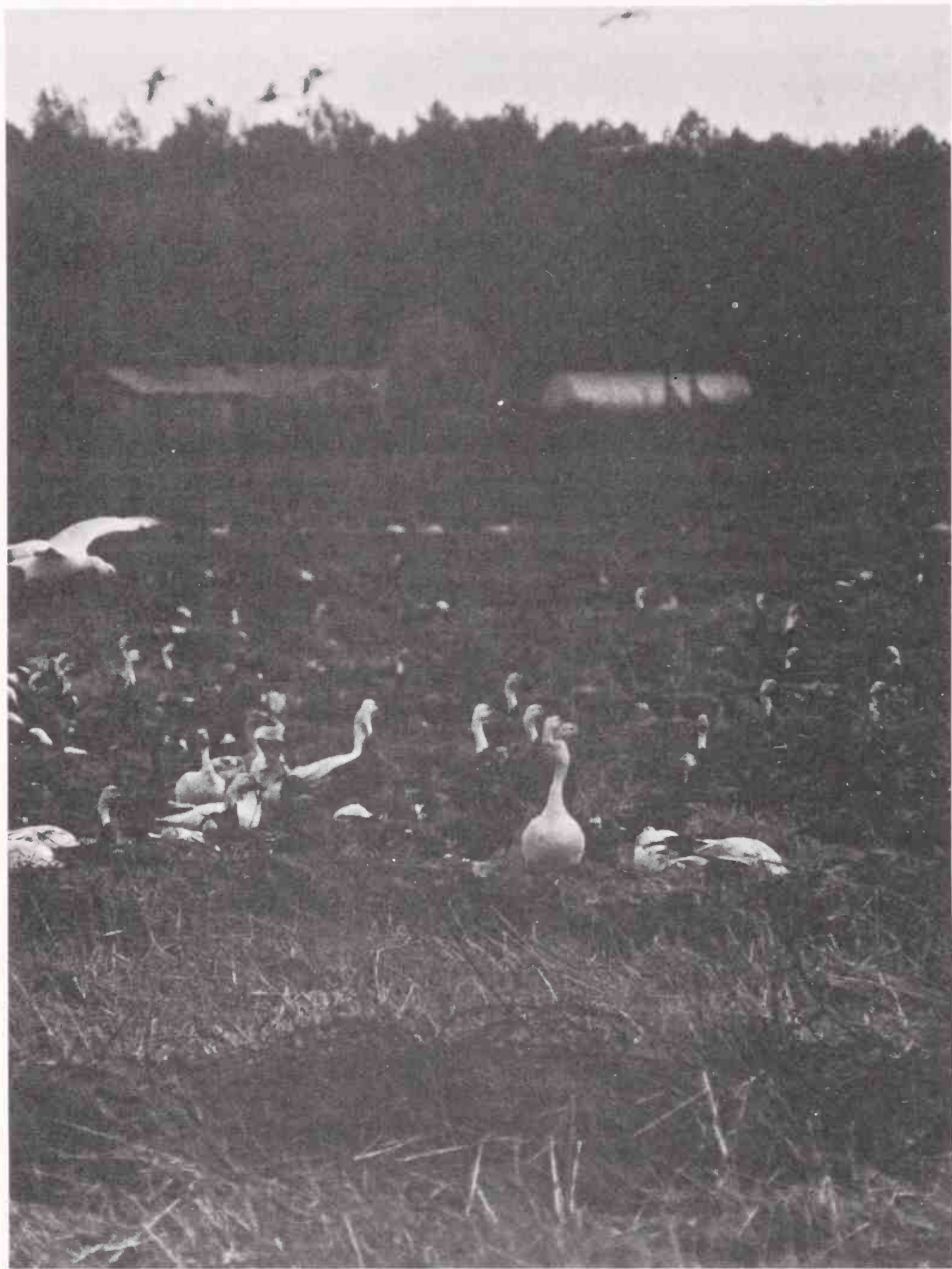
BEFORE the white man became the dominant species on our continent, Canada Geese were spread over a much larger area—both in their summer breeding grounds and in their wintering areas. Even though there were more geese than we count today, Canada Goose families were able to stay by themselves, mating only within the family and traveling with their family. They were even able to have some family privacy on the wintering grounds, for these were vast indeed.

It was this opportunity to maintain discrete populations on discrete areas which led to the widely differing families, or races, or sub-species if you must, of Canada Geese, as we mentioned in Chapter Two. This opportunity to stay by themselves allowed families to evolve in different directions. We think that this tendency is the main reason why we have some Canadas weighing twenty-one pounds, and other Canadas which tip the scales at only three pounds.

The wintering habitat shrank as humanity usurped the range. Not many geese winter in the midst of Houston's six and a half million people—but that spot was once a goose wintering habitat. How many wintering waterfowl were displaced by the seventeen and one half million humans who live in Texas and Louisiana?

At the other end of their annual migration, Canada Geese found that plowed land had replaced their former nesting sites. Drained potholes produced grain instead of goslings. How many geese once nested where Minneapolis and St. Paul now stand? How many geese nested on the millions of acres which are now covered with man's concrete highways, his concrete shopping centers, his homes—yes, even his sanitary landfills?

Although the total population of geese was reduced, most goose



These Blue and Snow Geese are wintering in Louisiana, southern terminus of a 3000-mile migration. The trip may take them more than ninety days in the spring, but sometimes takes them only four or five days in the fall.

species found themselves crowded, for the available habitat decreased more rapidly than their populations.

Then goose populations started increasing due to improved enforcement of game laws, due to the protection of state and federal refuges, due to reduced bag limits and shorter seasons set by more enlightened management. Increasing populations of geese found themselves being crowded into smaller and smaller chunks of habitat on both ends of their annual migration. Man is to blame for crowding, because man's changes in the environment caused the crowding. When man purposely put half a million geese on Horicon Refuge, where few geese had been before, what was the result?

We have changed the goose's instinctive migration path by shortstopping. As a result, total goose kill is probably increased, while distribution of the kill has been greatly narrowed. We kill more geese, but in fewer places. Do goose managers have either a moral or an ethical duty to distribute the kill in these days of Equal Opportunity? If so, we have a long way to go to accomplish that goal.

Because great numbers of geese are completely protected on refuges near urban centers with large numbers of people, they have become accustomed to man. At Crab Orchard, at Horicon, at Horse-shoe, at Blackwater—at many other refuges, bumper-to-bumper automobile traffic waits its turn to gawk at hundreds of thousands of geese concentrated on relatively small areas. The geese gawk back. Is there a fundamental change going on inside such a goose? Is he losing his instinctive fear of man? Or was that fear an acquired fear, no longer necessary in these days of "harvesting" today's "crop" of geese?

Huge concentrations of geese during hunting seasons sometimes lead to meat-market situations: The geese are "sold" as they leave the sanctuary and fly into the cruel world outside. Human greed for "day-shooting" money leads to a mercenary attitude. We begin to think of geese as a resource to be exploited, like coal dug out of the ground, rather than as part of a priceless heritage which has come down over the eons from our first ancestors.

Way back in the dim ages of antiquity, shorter and less erect hominoids hunted geese—small geese and large geese. Today's larger and more erect hominoids, equipped with shotguns which are marvels of killing efficiency, hunt geese in more crowded coverts. In eons to come, will those geese be no more wild than barnyard fowl—as a result of the partial domestication which necessarily accompanies crowding on inviolate sanctuaries?

We can only guess at the changes which may occur as a result of crowding a species which was once scattered over tremendous areas.

166 Some biologists predict that the result of so many geese staring at each other all winter long may well be a reduced desire to breed.

These biologists postulate that every species shows a determination to perpetuate itself. When placed under great downward stress, the species reproduces itself in greater numbers per parent. When the Coyote was harrassed on all sides, poisoned, trapped, shot from airplanes, sought by den hunters who destroyed the young, that species showed a remarkable ability to survive under stress. Part of that ability was demonstrated in larger average litters of pups. Although there were fewer Coyote bitches, they actually produced more pups than before. When the downward pressure was removed, the Coyote's numbers—geared to a survival struggle—erupted upwards. Today, there are probably more Coyotes in the nation than at any previous time.

Does the opposite happen? When individual members of a species see that their numbers are increasing to the point of crowding, do they react with some sort of a genus conscience and actually reduce their own reproduction? Do they have smaller broods?

Psychologists are fond of pointing out that when a house rat population is placed under severe stresses due to overcrowding, abnormal behavior becomes the norm. Rat mothers kill and eat their young. Crowded rats become irritable and fight viciously among themselves. And their reproduction rate definitely goes down.

Is it possible that the overcrowded gander who watches with jaded eye as thousands and hundreds of thousands of his kinfolk crowd in on him from September to April—is it possible that he and his goose go back to the northern breeding ground not really caring whether they reproduce or they don't? Animal behaviorist Robert Ardrey tells us that some of our most basic actions are triggered not by the brain, but by instinctual bundles which predate the development of a thinking brain by millions of years. Under the stress of crowding, is there a change in these instinctual bundles, which we do not yet understand?

No one knows the results of mankind's taking on the job of directing the future course of entire species of geese. Perhaps we shall never know.

There's an old song which claims, "When I'm not near the one I love—I love the one I'm near." Or, as one wag rephrased "Familiarity breeds contempt," "Familiarity attempts breeding." When geese share their wintering habitat—where courtships are performed and mates selected—with other races and families of geese, intermingling of those races and families is certain.

If a few families of *Branta canadensis*, weighing an average of three pounds each, share habitat with a few families of *Branta canadensis*

weighing in at seven pounds on the average, it is quite certain that we will have intermarriage (if you will allow the anthropomorphism) between the various-sized races. Will this lead eventually to a homogenization of the Canada Goose, so that all Canadas will be the same size? If this does happen, will the average be weighted toward the more numerous small Canada? Or will it be weighted in favor of the giant strain of Canadas which so many goose managers are trying hard to keep “pure” in the Foothills Flock of Colorado, in the newly reintroduced flocks in North Dakota, and in Missouri?

In Chapter Six we discussed the gradual evolution of the Lesser Snow Goose into a species which is composed of primarily blue-phase birds. We also have unconfirmed reports that the Ross’s Goose, the smallest of the white geese, has shown up with a dark-phase mutation. Frankly, we hope that this mutation is simply a sport which does not prove to be dominant, and that it will soon disappear from the scene.

But it starts you to wondering if Mother Nature has a prejudice against white-colored species. Albinos (which are simply individuals which lack pigmentation) have a rough time of it in the wild. The same deficiency which causes their rare coloration also causes poor eyesight and an extreme sensitivity to the sun’s rays. Because their unusual coloration causes them to stand out in a crowd, enemies often select them out of a group of normal-colored prey. This natural selection helps to eliminate the albinism.

Albinism is the extreme. Perhaps “normal” white colors are also discriminated against, to a lesser degree? Perhaps all white species are due for extinction in the path of evolutionary change?

The “accident of the night” which caused the first blue-phase Lesser Snow Goose to appear on the scene, may have also occurred in the Ross’s Goose. Why hasn’t it happened to the Greater Snow Goose which calls the eastern one-third of North America home? Perhaps it has. Perhaps somewhere in the cold, damp breeding grounds there is an egg hatching right now which will turn out to be a blue-phase Greater Snow Goose.

Goose managers of today are much less apt to “try out” a new scheme before studying all of its ramifications. We have learned that all parts of the complicated web of life are interconnected. We know that what changes one aspect of the goose’s environment changes all other parts of that same environment, sometimes in ways too subtle for us to detect until decades have passed.

It seems now that the guiding principle of goose management—at least as it affects the placement of goose populations—must be to stay with the proven good, and not try to go off in other directions. We can restore local nesting flocks, if we put them where they once were. We

168 can make refuges attractive for geese, but we must be sure that this attraction does not override their normal and natural desire to migrate on down the Flyway.

The goose managers of Canada and the United States have learned much in the past fifty years. They have accomplished minor miracles in some cases. They deserve a lot of credit for a job well done.

Remington Farms— Goosehunters' Heaven!

ENTERING the cornfield blind on Remington Farms on the eastern shore of Chesapeake Bay in December of 1977, I had two questions in my mind: Would this place, managed by waterfowl experts to produce waterfowl hunting, really offer the world's greatest goose shooting? And would the box of shells in my hand—loaded with steel pellets instead of lead—do the job of dropping Canada Geese?

I was carrying the familiar twelve-gauge Remington 1100, plugged to three-shot capacity, of course, and loaded with $1\frac{1}{8}$ steel shot, the only load Remington had commercially available at that time. Later I would have a chance to test the experimental $1\frac{1}{4}$ -ounce steel shot which was being developed for this same shell. Having decided that steel shot was here to stay, Remington was seeking a way to beef up the lighter steel shot to make it as effective as possible. The change was necessary because ingestion of lead shot by waterfowl causes lead poisoning as the soft metal is ground up in the gizzard. In heavily shot-over areas such as Maryland's Eastern Shore, this causes a very heavy loss of waterfowl.

The blind offered a plank seat, screened from the sharp eyes of the waterfowl by a layer of cornstalks laced through the fencing in front and in back. The blinds naturally had been up for many weeks, to let the birds get accustomed to them. There was a shelf to hold shells and camera gear.

Guide Don Travis had pointed out the blind with the usual set of instructions: "It'll probably be all ducks for a couple of hours. Geese feed all night long in the bright moonlight. Don't forget the 100 point system. Look for the drakes and you can keep on shooting much

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170 longer. Don't need to leave the blind to retrieve birds, my Lab will take care of that."

"Got it," I said. "Good luck," he answered over his shoulder as he headed for cover in the cornfield behind the blind.

The first ducks came too early to distinguish their color. They were Mallards, part of some 5500 four- to five-week-old birds raised here and released in late May. By late December these Mallards were as wary as any northern "Redlegs." I proved this by shooting well behind the first drake I could positively identify.

The next birds came in a tight group of five with the only greenhead right in the center. I passed. Then a big flock rose out of flooded timber off to the west and came winging past my blind. One drake with suicidal tendencies flew past at about ten yards. I swung on his impudent tailfeathers and dropped him with a thump on the frozen ground.

I could still hear the dog's feet hitting the hard ground as he ran for the retrieve when the next birds came—three drakes and a hen. I got out in front of the first drake and dropped him nicely, but failed to catch up with the second, blowing a huge gap in the air right behind him. Then the shooting got really fast as dozens of birds traded back and forth past our blinds. I took my time and dropped two more drakes—husky, fat birds resplendent in chestnut vests, with pearly gray bellies and bright green heads. If there's a prettier duck than the Mallard drake, I never met him.

My four 25-point drakes put me at the 100-point limit, so I reloaded just in case a goose came by and sat back to listen to the sounds of morning in the duck country. Whistling wings, quacking of surprised birds, an out-of-place feeding call sent out seductively by a hunter far to the east, the sound of twelve-gauge shotguns. The shooting finally died away as almost all of the fourteen hunters invited by Remington Farms reached the 100-point mark. We put tags on the legs of our birds, identifying the hunter by name, address and date. We had filled out those tags that morning, after enjoying one of the breakfasts for which Peggy Thomson and Remington Farms are justly famous.

Don said, "You got four drakes?" He wasn't asking me, he was telling me. I knew that he had kept the birds separated by hunter as the Black Labrador brought them back to him—both mine and those dropped by the hunter to my right. We tied on our tags, then carried our kill to the pickup truck, where three other hunters were kidding each other about their prowess that morning. One man was proud of his four drakes. The second man had one hen—shot first—and two drakes, which put him over the 100 mark, although not over the legal

limit. He was done for the day. The last hunter had two hens—70 plus 70. He was over the 100 mark but not over the legal limit. He, too, was done for the day. “Thought that first one was a drake,” he said, “and the second time I tried to hit a drake and killed the hen right behind him. Dang ducks shouldn’t fly so close behind each other.”

On the way back to the clubhouse for coffee, we talked it over and agreed that we could find no difference between the killing power of lead and steel shot. One man held out for the old lead shotshells, however: “I think there’ll be more crippling loss with this steel stuff because of the lower retained velocity of the lighter pellets.” It was my impression that there was going to be mighty little crippling loss on Remington Farms, where experienced guides mark the falls, and beautifully trained dogs efficiently retrieve every downed bird.

Over coffee we shared impressions with other hunters and with Hugh Galbreath, Manager of Remington Farms. Hugh said that none of the staff at Remington Farms saw any difference between lead and steel shot in killing power or effective range. I had another question, “Will they do the job on Canada Geese?”

Hugh put down his coffee cup and said, “Let’s find out!”

Guide Don Travis put me in a “Smitty,” a sunken fiberglass barrel, flush with the ground in a harvested cornfield. The blind had a 360-degree swivel seat and a convenient shell shelf. I removed the cover completely and ducked down out of the December wind, which was cold enough to give the lie to the bright sunshine. I was now loaded up with the experimental Remington twelve-gauge load, which featured 1¼ ounces of shot. If it extended the effective killing range, well and good, for I was going to need it against high-flying geese in this Bluebird weather.

I knew the geese would be wary. These birds were hatched in the far north, most of them in Canada. They had survived the long flight down to the Chesapeake Bay and had already been hunted for two and a half months along the waterfowl wonderland that Marylanders call the Eastern Shore. More than 600,000 Canadas were wintering there, the largest wintering flock of Canadas in the world, but only a part of the continental population, which seems to keep growing larger each year. The goose population at Remington Farms had peaked at 25,000 this winter, and only a very small percentage of these were taken by hunters.

No one had molested the honkers on the sanctuary since aviation magnate Glen L. Martin had established it in 1944. He had used the 3000 acres as a private hunting preserve, severely limiting the harvest and providing the geese with an inviolate place to rest, safe from

172 human intrusion. It took several years before the geese were sure that they were safe in the sanctuary. Today, they return the tourists' stares at ranges less than a hundred yards without taking fright or flight. Although the sanctuary is only about sixteen acres, no hunting is allowed near it, so the effective safe area is much greater.

Remington bought the land in 1956 and began managing it for maximum production of both wildlife and crops—for continued high yields of hunting pleasure from ducks, geese, deer, rabbits, quail and pheasants and for full protection of all nongame species of wildlife. In the twenty-two years since the Remington people took the area over, its 3100 acres have been managed in turn by four professional wildlife biologists: Dr. Joseph V. Linduska, Clark Webster, George Berger and Hugh Galbreath. Important soil conservation practices begun by Linduska and Webster have been continued. The land has benefited from terracing, leveling and construction of reservoirs, while wildlife habitat has been greatly improved by the planting of food and cover crops for rabbits, quail, pheasants and deer. I hoped to try shooting rabbits, but right now the word was *goose!*

Canadas have raised my blood pressure since the day I bagged my first one on that North Dakota prairie, more years ago than I'd like to mention. I've hunted geese from the Dakotas to Texas, from New Mexico to Quebec and even in Mexico, but I still get excited when I see them winging my way.

Right now, at least one hundred geese were lifting off the sanctuary and heading my way. Would they be within range? The first ones weren't. Gritting my teeth against the temptation, I held my fire while the hunter to the south of me cut loose. I didn't even hear the rattle of pellets against wing feathers—he didn't reach them at all, much less knock one down. Right behind those sky-high birds came another fifty, but these birds were more directly over me. They were a beautiful sight as they grew larger with each wingbeat—but they also grew higher and higher. I knew they were at least sixty yards away, so I held my fire. So did everyone else.

Then six birds came out, hurrying after the bigger feeding flock that had gone east. Intent on catching up to their hungry brothers and sisters at a cornfield banquet somewhere, they forgot about making altitude. They were only thirty yards up when they reached my blind. I swung in front of the lead bird's nose and touched one off. He crumpled! I swung quickly, tried to center another target, got on one, changed my mind, swung toward the tail-end bird, which was now standing on his tail in a mad grab for the safety of altitude. I fired. Feathers flew, but so did the goose! I shot again and down he came.



A big Canada sets his flaps and coasts in to the decoys.

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I'm sure I was one big grin from ear to ear as the Lab raced to pick up one of the geese and carry it to Don Travis, who waited near the big trees at the fence line two hundred yards north, then run back for the second one. The legal limit was three Canada Geese, but Remington Farms imposed a further restriction when the season was open for both ducks and geese, allowing only two Canadas per day.

For the rest of my hunting time, I was shooting a Nikkormat with a 205 mm. lens, and watching the geese. Singles, pairs, small flocks and groups of a hundred or more, they came to the sanctuary and left it in favor of feeding fields beyond our horizon. Most of them flew too high, and the experienced hunters watched and cursed softly under their breath. Every once in a while a goose or two would miscalculate and come over within range. I saw some of the most accurate shooting I've ever seen that afternoon, as all of our group limited out at two geese apiece.

That afternoon we hunted rabbits over Beagles, using twenty-gauge Remington autoloaders. The well-trained dogs chased dozens of bunnies out of the brambles at the cost of many a pained yelp. But we didn't kill dozens. Finding the scurrying rabbits a real challenge, I shot up the weeds, the trunks of trees and the plowed ground, but only put four cottontails in the day's bag. Other hunters went after preserve pheasants and pronounced them sporty and plentiful. Still another group sharpened their eyes for the next morning's shoot on a game known as "Aw, shucks!" It is also called other things, at times.

After supper in the dining room of Broadnox Lodge—named for the first settler, one Captain Broadnox—we swapped hunting stories for a couple of hours, then sought out the luxurious beds.

Legend has it that Captain Broadnox had a terrible temper. He died while standing trial for slaying a servant by beating him to death with the end of a rope. Legend says that he was buried in a standing position very near the Lodge, in order that he might better watch the servants and stop their thieving! Also according to legend, the ghost of Captain Broadnox makes moaning sounds in the night, and the sounds are loudest in the north bedroom upstairs. I slept there. The only groans I heard were coming from my roommate, who hurt from eating too many of Peggy Thomson's crab cakes and too many raw oysters before his filet mignon.

We had wonderful shooting again that next morning, using the heavier experimental load. Shooting stopped at noon whether we had filled or not. The limited shooting on Remington Farms is part of the management program, which controls the harassment of the birds and continues to increase the numbers of harvestable populations of game birds and animals.



Hal Swiggett, with the Texas hat, and Earl Larsen of Remington show off a nice Canada taken from a Smitty blind on Remington Farms on Maryland's Eastern Shore.

There are two hunting parties each week, and each one hunts one and one-half days. Thus, total hunting time is three days per week, and the birds are left strictly alone on four days of every week. This restrictive regimen is coupled with Remington's voluntary reduction in the goose bag to two birds per day instead of the legal three. This gets the hunters out of the field quicker, further reducing harrassment of the geese. After the duck season is closed, while the goose season is still open, Remington may increase the daily limit to three geese. Hugh Galbreath says that some surrounding clubs and individuals also trim their shooting hours, some even more drastically than Remington. Some even close completely for two or three days at a stretch, to allow birds to feed without being spooked.

The entry sign at Remington Farms directs the thousands of visitors who tour the farm every year to see game birds and animals at close range. The sign says that Remington Farms aims are "Innovation, Demonstration, Education." The farm's practices bear witness to the determination to reach these goals. Tours continue throughout the year, except during hunting season. School groups visit the farm in spring and fall.

Most important of all, Remington Farms teaches by example, proving that good farming for wildlife is also good farming for continued high yields of crops. Multiflora rose provides nesting and escape cover for game birds, songbirds and rabbits. *Sericea lespedeza* and other crops are chosen to fit the soil type, the climate and the wildlife species concerned, with an eye to providing maximum production of food and cover—in turn guaranteeing maximum crops of game birds and animals. The Whitetail Deer herd is very healthy; we saw twelve on one morning's goose hunt. Rabbit shooting is excellent, and goodly populations of quail and pheasant provide good shooting.

When I missed a particularly tricky clay pigeon—the high incoming—at the "Aw, Shucks" game that afternoon, a squad member scolded me: "You'll never get to heaven talking that way!" I disagree. I already was in shotgunner's heaven. I couldn't dream up a finer place to spend eternity—a showplace farm combining beauty and abundant game, right in the middle of twenty million people. Surrounded by cities, there's a heaven on earth where the geese fly within range, where the ducks are plentiful, where the crab cakes are so delicious that they're almost illegal, where the beds are comfortable, the air is clean and even the ghost of Captain Broadnox can't moan loud enough to be heard over the music of thousands of Canada Geese. Go to heaven? For a shotgunner, or for anyone who loves wildlife, Remington Farms is heaven on earth!

*Status of
America's Geese*

IT WAS 488 years ago that the first European immigrant–explorer set foot on the North American continent. We can assume that it was about 487 years ago that the first white man killed and ate a goose on this continent. In the nearly five centuries since that happened, mankind has impinged on the goose in many ways. He has killed him for sport and for food. He has built cities where once the goose nested or wintered. He has sprayed chemicals into the environment which have reduced the goose's reproductive potential. He has drained the goose's favored haunts and built industrial complexes where once the goose enjoyed the sunshine of his wintering habitat.

How well has the goose family fared against man's onslaught? Has man succeeded in his belated efforts to restore the goose population? Has he succeeded or failed as manager of this priceless natural resource? Will he be able to continue goose hunting as a sport in the centuries to come? Are there crying needs which must be met?

We goose hunters have strong opinions on these subjects, but all too often our opinions are not based on knowledge or fact. We believe what we want to believe in many cases. Therefore, to obtain better answers to these all-important questions, I have asked some of the best-informed people in the field of wildlife conservation for their opinions. Here's what the experts have to say:

DANIEL A. POOLE

President of the Wildlife Management Institute and one of the most respected voices in the field of wildlife, Daniel Poole has this to say:

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Goose managers are neither “flops” nor “smash hits.” They either are nothing short of miraculous or just plain lucky, considering the odds against them.

When invited to pass judgment on the past, present and future of geese (or any wildlife), many people focus on the fellow afield with a gun. They deal with the evil they see, rather than with the evil they do not see—themselves, their fellow man and the society of which they are a part; forces over which the goose manager has scant control, if any. U.S. and Canadian human populations increase steadily. Building lots, rooftops, streets, highways, airports and shopping centers erupt as erratically as mushrooms. So do factories, plowed fields, scrap piles, trash-dumps, septic tanks, sewer outfalls, strip mines, dams, irrigation ditches, homes for the aged, nurseries and day-care centers, welfare rolls, cemeteries, joggers and national debts.

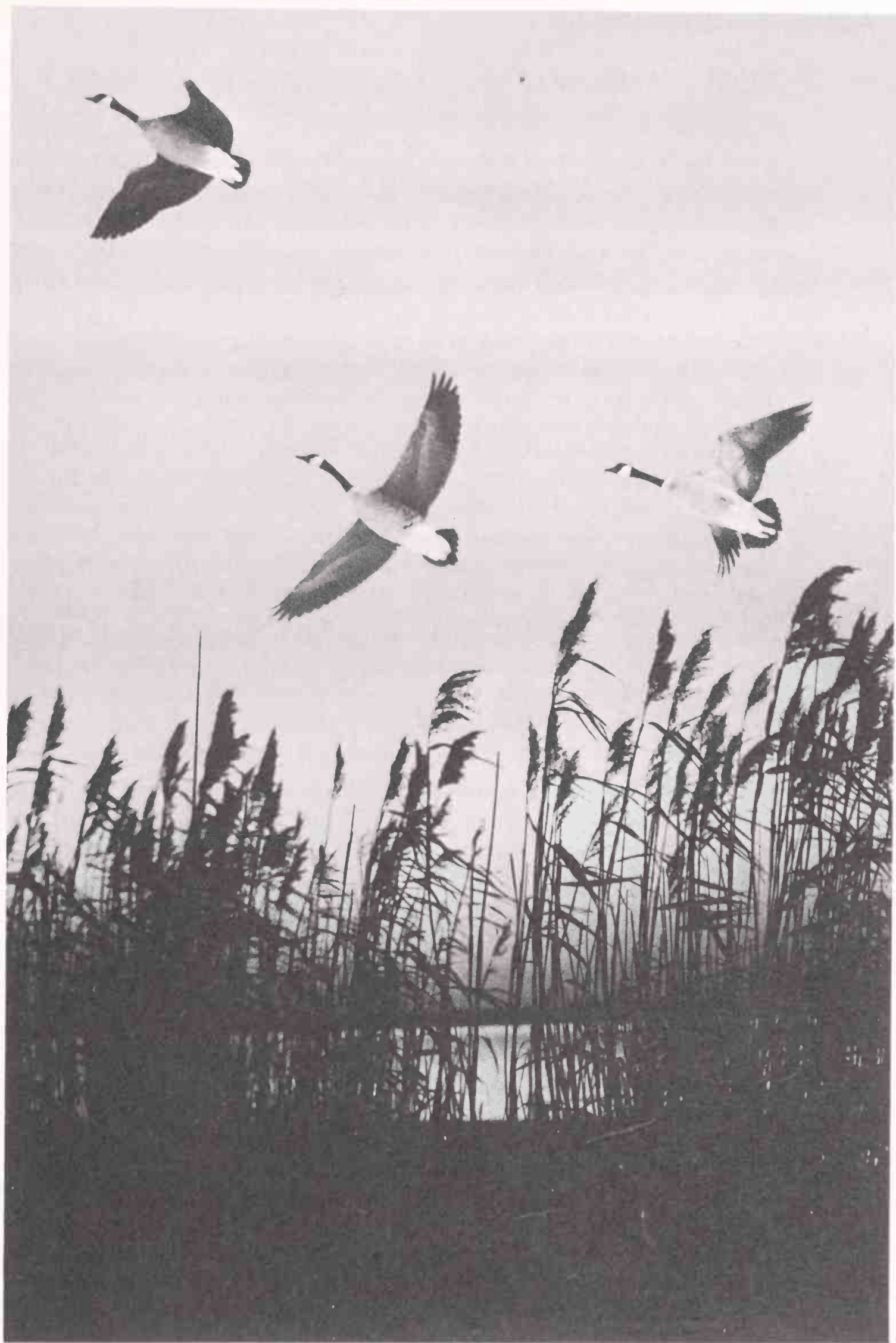
Farmer Brown, faced with the burden of paying off creditors, and financing his kid’s piccolo lessons, his wife’s facelift or whatever and his annual fall hunt with the boys for geese at James Bay, converts wetlands to profit-producing pasture or grainfields and uses chemicals to sweeten the soil, whack weeds and teach insects a thing or two.

All these forces, one way or another, hit geese right where they live—spring, summer, fall and winter—by denying them essential and uncontaminated seasonal habitat. The chemicals and heavy metals taken in with their food or drink debilitate them or their young.

Where habitat is available, the manager, through hunting regulations or other means, can restore or increase goose populations. Witness Horicon Marsh, Crab Orchard, East Meadows, Swan Lake, Brigantine and myriad others. Protecting geese from over-shooting is child’s play compared to protecting goose habitat from the effects of an ever-increasing, outreaching human population. How well society handles land and water use has much bearing on the well-being of geese, other wildlife and, ultimately, man himself.

Future goose hunting will not be the same in all places as it is today. Nor is it the same today as it was years ago. In a situation of growing human population and a relatively stable, or perhaps lessened, number of geese, demand for the birds is bound to increase. A scarce resource has its price, in terms of both cost to those who seek to use it and denial of entry by those who control access to the resource.

Wherever the birds congregate, near metropolitan centers or otherwise, hunters will pay a higher price. That’s an immutable law of scarce resources. And in some places, unless and until more hunters learn to overcome their indifference to trespassing, firing near occupied buildings, abuse of landowners and their property, littering and drunkenness, hunters who do not own or lease shooting grounds—and that is most of them—may find their access to geese curtailed sharply.



180 TOM KIMBALL

Tom Kimball heads the nation's largest sportsmen's organization, the National Wildlife Federation. His is the respected voice of the organized sportsmen, a voice you can count on to make the hunters' needs known in high government circles. On the question of future goose hunting, Kimball says:

Geese, by and large, seem to have adjusted well to technological man's inhabitation of North America. With few exceptions, it would have been difficult for man to design a better goose management program than that provided through serendipity by agriculture. In some cases this strategy has been so well received by the geese that they are viewed as vermin by the farmers. However, it is the sportsmen who have been blessed by the increasing numbers of winged gourmet's delight. And with a moderate amount of attention focused toward protecting far northern breeding grounds and maintaining decent wintering water, hunters and outdoor enthusiasts for generations to come will continue to be awed and sustained by the noise of airborne waves of wild geese.

JOHN M. ANDERSON

Frosty Anderson is a waterfowl biologist who managed a private waterfowl hunting club for many years, but who is better known for his work as Director of the Sanctuary Division of the Audubon Society. He has this to say:

Goose hunting in the southwestern Lake Erie marshes has been vastly improved by Karl Bednarik's propagation program at the state-owned Magee Marsh. I would say the total goose kill for the region is more than twenty times the level of the early 1960's. Giant Canada Geese now nest throughout the Lake Erie marshes, which was unheard of in the 1950's.

I think the "shortstopping" in the Mississippi Flyway would have eventually occurred regardless of the federal refuge system. I see it happening in the Northeast without the benefit of refuges such as the Horicon or Necedah.

Because of the ease with which breeding flocks can be established, their fidelity to their nesting grounds, their tolerance for man during the nesting season in contrast to their wariness after the hunting season opens, management of the Canada Goose is without a doubt one of the outstanding success stories in modern wildlife management.

The other side of the coin is the adverse effect of unusual concentrations on hunter behavior ("firing lines") and the danger of disease outbreak.

If heredity and experience and training are the criteria, Lynn A. Greenwalt must be considered as eminently qualified for his position as Director of the United States Fish and Wildlife Service. Born on a national wildlife refuge, the son of a refuge manager, he married Judy—daughter of a refuge manager. He started working for the Fish and Wildlife Service while still in college as a summer employee of the refuge system.

Add to his impressive academic credentials in the field of wildlife management a concentrated lifetime of experience in many different branches of the Service, and you have a man well qualified to direct the nation's leading conservation agency. We asked him for his opinions on the status and future of geese in North America. Here is his reply:

In general, geese are probably more abundant in North America today than ever before. In part, this is due to the fact that many of their most important breeding grounds are in the far north where there has been little disturbance by man. Also, agricultural practices, water development projects and management programs, in combination, have enhanced the welfare of geese on migration and in hunting areas by providing an abundance of food, adequate water and sanctuary, and careful regulation of hunting. The future looks good, although changes in any of these factors (e.g., increased oil and mineral exploration and development in the far north) could affect the abundance of geese.

With a few local exceptions, Canada Geese are doing exceptionally well. Attention today is being directed at least as much toward problems of population distribution as toward problems of population size. Improved distribution is important in order to avoid potential problems with disease, depredations, increased hunter regimentation and diminished hunting quality that seem inevitably associated with excessive concentrations.

The Aleutian Goose is the only species of North American waterfowl categorized as endangered. However, good progress has been made in defining the reasons for this bird's problems and what must be done to enhance its prospects for delisting. An intensive effort by the Fish and Wildlife Service and the State of California is underway now to improve the status of this goose, and I'm optimistic about the future.

Populations of Lesser Snows are also at satisfactory levels. There is evidence that some redistribution of breeding populations is occurring in the Arctic, perhaps associated with a cooling trend in Arctic breeding areas. We must remain alert to the status of populations from specific breeding areas, such as Wrangell Island, and be prepared to take additional steps as necessary to ensure their welfare. But in general, Lesser Snows are doing well and their future is reasonably secure.

Greater Snows are on the increase and harvest regulations have reflected that condition. Again, I'm optimistic about the future.

The Ross's Goose has received special regulatory consideration for many years. It now appears that their numbers are greater than formerly thought, and additional attention is being given to an evaluation of their status and management needs.

Whitefronts breeding in Alaska and wintering in the Pacific Flyway have declined in numbers during recent years. We are uncertain as to the exact cause, but it may be related to greater than desirable harvest through a combination of sport and subsistence hunting. I intend to watch this situation closely and take whatever corrective measures may be necessary. Whitefronts wintering in coastal areas of Texas and Louisiana and in Mexico are faring better.

Brant migrating to Atlantic coastal wintering areas have suffered recently from two unusually severe winters. This, plus some production failures, has seriously reduced their numbers; the season is currently closed. Brant in the Pacific Flyway are in somewhat better condition, but they still require careful monitoring. Populations of these sea geese are notoriously unstable because reproductive success is at the mercy of the extreme weather variations in the far northern breeding area. I'm confident that they will recover as they have in the past, given time and protection.

Fluctuations in population status of geese, and also ducks, for that matter, generally reflect changes in breeding habitat conditions. Arctic-nesting birds have a brief period during which nesting must get underway. If inclement spring weather delays the start of the nesting cycle, the chances for good production of young are substantially decreased. Complete production failures have occurred as a result of late spring storms and snowfall. We are improving our ability to spot such events in time to modify regulations, if necessary.

How to Cook Your Goose

IT'S MY personal opinion that roast goose is one of the finest gastronomic delights to be enjoyed anywhere. It's also my personal opinion that geese should be plucked, never skinned. The skin keeps the juices in, and that is necessary because the wild goose is an athlete—a lean, hard-muscled, well-conditioned athlete. Unlike a barnyard goose, which waddles in fat, the wild goose has almost no fat in its muscle tissues. Thus, the main problem with roasting a wild goose is to keep it from drying out.

There are as many ways to cook geese as there are cooks. Here are a few.

ROAST WILD GOOSE

Roasting a wild goose is much different than roasting a fat, barnyard goose. If you learned how to roast tame geese, you must change your methods for wild geese, which have almost no fat.

First of all, you must sauté everything that goes inside the body cavity of a wild goose. It will *not* be soaked with goose grease in the cooking, as it would be in cooking a domestic bird.

Second, you must baste more often, or cover with a brown paper bag or with an aluminum foil tent—you must make sure that the lean meat does not get too dry.

Among the many good recipes for roasting a wild bird, here is one best suited to a young, tender bird. If you got one with pinfeathers, here's the way to go:

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184 Pluck the bird, pick and singe the pinfeathers off, soak in lightly salted cold water for four hours. Then you'll need:

1 lemon

1 onion, apple-sized, chopped

1 cup of chopped apple (a green apple is as good as a ripe one)

1/2 cup margarine (not the diet margarine, which burns instead of melting)

1 cup chopped, dried apricots, or equivalent canned or fresh

1 double handful of croutons (not sage or garlic)

4 slices of bacon

Next: Cut the lemon in quarters, rub the bird inside and out, then squeeze the remaining juice, if any, into the cavity. Sauté the onion in margarine till soft, then add the apple, apricot, croutons, salt and pepper to taste.

Then: Stuff the bird with the sautéed mixture. Use thread to sew him tightly shut. Skewer strips of bacon to the top of the bird, place him breast side up—naturally—in a brown paper bag and pop him



A bag of Pacific Black Brant. Note the identifying white circles around their necks.

into the roasting pan. An oven set at 325° should do nicely, allowing 30 minutes per pound of raw goose.

Last: When the goose is tender, check to see if breast is browned to suit your eye. If not, uncover and place under the broiler for the few minutes needed to brown the skin on the breast.

Serve and enjoy!

Using that basic recipe for roast goose with stuffing, you can enjoy great variety, simply by varying the material with which you stuff the goose, or by using a fruit glaze of some kind on the almost finished bird. Cherry, peach, orange, apple, grapes—almost any fruit will provide a glaze which makes the skin tasty and keeps the bird from drying out. But it is easier to get variety by simply varying the stuffing. Here are a few different stuffings for your roast goose:

FRUIT-STUFFED GOOSE

Mix together:

3 1/2 cups of soft bread cubes

1 1/2 cups of diced apple

2 oranges, sectioned

1/2 cup of raisins

3/4 cup chopped onion

1 cup of grapes, halved

1 cup melted butter or oleo

Add enough water to mix it all up into a gooey mess. Stuff it into the bird. Lay 5 strips of raw bacon across the top of the bird prior to roasting.

OLD-FASHIONED BREAD STUFFING

This stuffing, which consists of butter, onion, celery, dry bread cubes, parsley and sage if desired, can be adapted to the less greasy wild goose by adding salt-pork or bacon drippings to the mixture before spooning it into the cavity. It's a lazy man's way to go, however, and the other stuffings are better.

186 BRAISED GOOSE WITH RUTABAGA

4 slices of bacon
2 sliced carrots
1 large onion
chopped thyme
1/4 teaspoon garlic salt
chopped parsley
1/2 teaspoon whole black pepper
1 large rutabaga, sliced
flour

Put the whole goose in a large pot. Add the bacon, carrots, onion, thyme, garlic salt, parsley, and pepper. Bring the whole works to a boil, then ease back to a simmer, which should make the meat fork-tender in a couple of hours. Remove the bird from the stock.

Sauté the rutabaga in bacon fat for four minutes, then drain it and put it in with the stock. Cook until tender. Strain all the good-tasting stuff out of the stock and reserve. Mix flour and cold water to make a smooth paste, add it to the stock and stir thoroughly. Pour the reserved stuff over the goose, then pour the stock over and serve it with the rutabaga. Mmmm!

TWICE-STUFFED GOOSE

Pluck, draw and wash a big goose. If you have trouble getting the last of the fuzz or pinfeathers off the carcass, singe them off over a burning rolled-up newspaper.

Soak the carcass for four hours or longer in lightly salted cold water to draw out dried or clotted blood. Pour the water off and wash thoroughly again under running water, to remove excess salt. Put the goose in a covered oven pan and set him aside.

Next you'll need:

3 fist-sized onions (If your fist is really big, make it two fist-sized onions.)
2 cans of chopped mushroom bits and pieces
2 cups of canned ripe green olives, pitted
3 packages of "brown and long-grained" rice (This replaces wild rice, which is too expensive these days.)
3 cans of cream of mushroom soup
A small can (or jar) of diced pimientos

First: Sauté in butter the chopped onions. As they become soft, add the mushroom bits and pieces, stirring gently. Then add the green olives. Stir all together and simmer. Keep from burning.

Second: Boil the rice, including the packages of seasoning which usually come with it. (I use Uncle Ben's.) Boil almost all of the water off and set aside to cool a bit.

Third: Spoon the onion-mushroom-olive mixture into the rice and stir well. Stuff this mixture into the goose, pushing as much into the body cavity as possible. Pile the rest of the stuffing in and around the bird in the pan.

Fourth: Roast in a preheated oven at 350 degrees for one hour. Then turn the temperature down to 300 and let it cook slowly for several hours. (You may have to reduce temperatures and times at sea level—my cooking is done at 5200-foot elevation.)

Fifth: When the bird shows signs of getting tender—when a fork will slide in easily—remove it from the oven. Use a serving spoon or ladle to scoop all of the dressing out of the bird. Mix it thoroughly with the dressing left outside, stirring it vigorously into the juices baked out of the bird. Then replace the stuffing inside the bird, tamping in as much as possible.

Sixth: Mix the rest of the rice-onion-olive-mushroom mixture with three cans of cream of mushroom soup. Use it just as you spoon it out of the can; do not dilute. The mixture should be thick and gluey. Pile an inch-thick layer of the mixture over the breast and upper side of the goose.

Seventh: Return the goose to the oven, uncovered, and cook till very tender. Sprinkle the jar of pimiento on top of the soup mixture. It adds taste as well as visual appeal.

Eighth: Eat it. The dressing is almost as good as the goose. There won't be any gravy, but who cares?

SPECKLEBELLY SUPREME

The tastiest of all geese is a young Whitefront, or Specklebelly. For the technical-minded, I refer to *Anser albifrons*. You can simply roast this goose with a sage stuffing, similar to the one you used on your Thanksgiving turkey. But if you want to add a touch of pizzaz, spread orange marmalade all over his body, just about fifteen minutes before you take him out of the roaster. Complete the cooking uncovered.

If you want to spend some time preparing one of the ultimate taste treats in all the realm of goosedom, try Specklebelly Supreme.

188 You'll need:

1/2 a lemon

Glaze ingredients: 1/2 cup apricot or peach marmalade, chopped ginger, 3 teaspoons of ginger preserves, 3 tablespoons of cooking sherry, 1/2 cup honey, stirred together thoroughly

1 large onion, chopped

6 strips of bacon (fat bacon is okay)

First: Rub the goose inside and out with the lemon, covering as much of the surface as you can. Squeeze any juice remaining into a mixing bowl with the rest of the glaze ingredients.

Second: Sprinkle the chopped onion inside the body cavity. Put the goose in a roasting pan.

Third: Baste the goose exterior carefully with the glaze. Pop into the broiler for 15 minutes. Remove and baste carefully again with the glaze. Drape the bacon strips over the breast of the goose and replace it in a roasting oven at 325 degrees.

Fourth: Roast till done, basting occasionally (10–15 minutes) with what's left of the glaze. Serve it hot and await comments without a worry in the world.

HUNTING CAMP GOOSE STEW

Bill Case has hunted geese in northeastern New Mexico for more than sixty years. I hunted with him when he was 82, still blowing a mean goose call and capable of taking the frigid weather motionless in an earthen blind, with the best of them. He gave me this recipe, a good way to prepare a hearty meal for hunters without spending a lot of time doing it—and without worrying about exactly when it will be done.

3 large onions, quartered

1 large bunch of carrots, chopped into chunks

1 stalk of celery, cut up

2 cans of whole tomatoes

bay leaf

2 small potatoes per person, peeled and quartered

Bill uses a cleaver to chop a seven-pound goose into ten or twelve pieces. Exactly how you section the goose is of absolutely no impor-

tance. Toss the goose in a big iron pot. Add the onions, carrots, celery, tomatoes, bay leaf, potatoes and—as Bill put it—anything else you can think of and happen to have handy.

Cover the unsavory looking mess with just enough water to submerge everything, and put it on the burner or the back of the stove. Five or six hours later it is edible. Eight hours later it is plumb tasty. It's not gourmet food, but it's going to disappear quickly when your hunters come in from another day afield.

Naturally there are refinements of this recipe, especially if you use a crockpot or slow cooker. You can greatly reduce the amount of water required and be more selective with the other ingredients. But for hunters, Bill's Goose Stew is great.

CREAMED GOOSE WITH SOUR CREAM

The really “cool” goose hunter usually picks out the biggest birds from a flock overhead. Naturally, I never can remember to try for the biggest ones—I just get excited and shoot the nearest. This means that I usually get younger, tenderer birds. The “cool” hunter gets some tough oldtimers who have battled the winds and the weather—and avoided “cool” hunters for ten years or even more.

Occasionally you may get such a tough old goose. If you do, try eating creamed goose with sour cream.

Skin the bird first. (Yes, I know it goes against the grain, but you have to do it this time.) Put it to soak in cold, salted water. Then get together the rest of the ingredients.

You'll need:

- 1 clove of garlic, sliced in half*
- 1 big onion, diced*
- 3 big sprigs of fresh parsley (flakes in an emergency)*
- 1 cup of red wine (port, burgundy or sherry)*
- a dash of Worcestershire*
- 2 cans cream of mushroom soup*
- 1 can whole mushrooms, drained*
- 1 1/2 cups sour cream*
- melted butter*

Next: Drain the goose and pat him dry. Rub lightly inside and out with the sliced half of a garlic clove. Discard the garlic completely. Put the bird in your crockpot or slow cooker, and sprinkle the onion and

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190 parsley over its breast. Then pour on the wine and the Worcestershire. (Some folks prefer Tabasco to the Worcestershire, but take it easy!)

Next: Cover the whole mess with the mushrooms and mushroom soup, and stir well. Put the lid on and simmer for eight hours. You'll then have a goose which falls off the bones. Remove the meat to a bowl, leaving the bones behind. Then add the sour cream to the mixture, stirring constantly. Be careful not to add the sour cream too fast, or it will form chunks.

Ready? Pour the sour-cream mixture over the goose and serve with a dollop of melted butter on top of each serving. Obviously, this recipe can be made with only the goose breasts, but I think that is wasting a lot of good meat, even though it's hard-to-get-at meat.

GOOSE SOUP

Frankly, we seldom have any leftovers at our house. But if you do, try goose salad or goose soup. Soup first!

leftover goose
leftover dressing
1 large onion, chopped
celery tops
salt and pepper
1 diced carrot
2 chicken bouillon cubes
2 tablespoons butter or oleo
2 tablespoons flour
1 cup milk

Put the goose carcass, and any leftover dressing, in a large pot, and add the onion, celery, salt and pepper, carrot and bouillon cubes. Add some herb seasoning. (Experiment a little here.) Cover with water and set it on the back burner to simmer while you mix up the butter, flour and milk on the front one. These make the thickening. Pick the goose meat off the bones and mix the meat, stock and thickening over a low flame, stirring constantly. The result is excellent, and looks especially nice when it is topped with croutons or parsley and a dollop of melted butter.

GOOSE SALAD

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Any recipe that works for chicken or ham salad will work with cold cooked goose salad. If you lack imagination, try this one:

1 diced apple

2 large carrots, shredded

1 stalk celery, diced

1/2 cup raisins

1/2 cup mayonnaise

Combine all the goose you can scrape off the carcass with these ingredients. Serve cold on a lettuce leaf. A slice of lemon or lime on the side is a nice touch.

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